

Science Fantasy

No. 14

VOLUME 5

2/-



In the next issue

Sinclair was a very mediocre artist who never aspired to fame—somewhere, somehow, the final inspiration was always missing. Until one day he found the little egg-shaped charm which apparently changed his life and also the lives of many others. Thereafter he had the touch of genius.

THE TALISMAN

By K. Houston Brunner

Illustrated by QUINN

Sinclair liked to walk in London. He liked to watch the people more than the places ; he enjoyed the bustle and the milling thousands that throng its busy streets, letting the feel of this city which resembles no other city sink into his mind. He was struck with the picture he was working on and the sudden flaming heat had driven him out of his flat into the streets scented with hot asphalt, exhaust fumes and many, many people.

Then he saw it . . .

an intriguing novelette

A N D

★ TUCKER
★ TUBB
★ BULMER
★ FRITCH
★ BURKE

Science Fantasy

Vol. 5 No. 14

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GUEST EDITORIAL

This month's Guest Editor contributes a pungent column to the growing list of authors who have had an opportunity of getting their pet grouch off their chest. Coming at a time when his first long novel Alien Dust has just been published and his new serial is running in New Worlds readers will have an opportunity of checking whether Mr. Tubb practises what he preaches !

FOLLOW MY LEADER

By E. C. TUBB

Sometimes I think that there is no future in science fiction. I also have the uneasy feeling that we are on the spiral route of diminishing returns and heading to the point of final oblivion. Two things are bringing this about. One we cannot avoid, it is due to circumstances beyond our control, but the other . . .

Science fiction, the ugly duckling of the literary world has, within a comparatively short space of time, blossomed from obscurity into fully-fledged respectability as a means of expression in its own right but, in so doing, it has suffered from a continual process of wing-clipping. We are fortunate in that we are able to scan the entire rise of our favourite literature. We may also be in a position to see its fall. I am pessimistic because there seems to be a vicious circle which is doing a fine job of trammelling imagination and emasculating what was, should be, and we hope will again be the most exciting and interesting field of literature.

When Jules Verne was writing his tales of fantastic adventure he was, though he didn't know it, writing science fiction. He didn't know it because the term hadn't been invented then. When it was, Verne was dubbed as the 'Father of Science Fiction' by the same magazine which envolved the title. Let us not argue as to whether or not he deserved his posthumous fame. Instead, let's see whether or not 'Father' could hold his own were he writing today.

The answer is no.

It is safe to assume that, were Verne writing the same tales now they would never see publication. The reason isn't hard to find. Verne would not now be writing science fiction at all. In fact his 'science' would make a ten-year old squirm and his characterisations, action, motivations and settings would earn him nothing more than a series of rejection slips. Because, of course, science has caught up and passed both he and the writers of earlier fame.

It wasn't their fault, but there it is. Science is catching up with futuristic writers all the time and it just so happened that Verne was a particularly good prophet. A good prophet shouldn't mind being put out of business by having his prophecies come home to roost but it has the effect of dimming his glory.

Who now reads Jules Verne?

But Verne belonged, together with Wells and a few others, to the first segment of what we now know as science fiction. They were respectable. They wrote books. They were accepted as top-line authors and people weren't ashamed of admitting to both reading and liking them. It wasn't until the first pulp magazines devoted to the medium arrived that tales of futuristic adventure became not-quite-the-thing. It has taken a quarter of a century for it to struggle back into the realm of hard-covers and, during that time, it has lost a lot of what made it the thing it was.

Take a look at the early magazines. Mostly they had a compilation of stories, not-too-well written, with cardboard characters and stilted action. We had 'mad scientists,' 'alien invaders,' 'lost worlds,' 'incredible discoveries,' we had everything except the kitchen sink and, sometimes, we even had that too.

I do not regret the mutation of those early stories into the far better written and presented ones of today, but one thing I do regret. I regret the variety and loss of vision, the touch of the impossible and the incredibly wild concepts. Those stories were badly written—yes, but those magazines contained stories each of which was *different*.

Verne wrote what he did because he wanted to. Wells did the same. All the good, well-known authors put down on paper what they con-

sidered to be a good story and, because they did that, they succeeded. Now ?

Now authors seem to write for the sole reason that they want to sell. Nothing wrong in that. Nothing wrong in wanting to see your name in print, receiving a cheque, knowing that you've done something to be proud of, but there are two ways of doing it, and, when it causes what has been happening then it's most horribly wrong.

It works like this.

Joe writes a story, for once a little different to the rest of the general run, and is hailed as a success, and a potential genius. Fred wants to sell a story so, naturally, he follows the trend. Sam, also wanting to sell, 'studies the market' and writes a yarn just like the recent best-seller. The result ? The harrassed editor has to read a succession of yarns all with the same style, the same concepts, the same presentation. The editor has to fill his magazine, he knows that the readers liked the story by Joe, so he runs similar ones by Sam and Fred. New authors want to enter the field, they also 'study the market' they sit down and write a story slanted especially for a certain magazine and a certain editor.

And so it goes on.

How many magazines now give the impression that all the stories have been written by the same man ? How many readers have grown sick of the same old stuff served in the same old way ? How many critics, scanning the field for purposes of review, have passed the acid comment that, 'read one and you've read 'em all' ?

We can't blame the critics. We've had a spate or cycle of 'atomic doom' stories, 'galactic rule' stories, 'mutation' stories, 'robot' stories, the list can be as long as your arm. But we've had all these stories neatly packaged into their own separate eras, a nice, big, sickening helping of the same type of yarn at the same time. And it get's worse, not better.

The editor must like it to print it, so write more of the same. So-and-so's story was popular, so repeat the dose as before. Study the market, see what the magazine prints, then write something just like it. Exaggerated ? It wasn't so long ago that a top-line American magazine chose to warn all authors that a certain type of story would no longer be accepted, no matter how well-written. So the 'atomic doom' story cycle died a belated death only to yield to another cycle. Maybe 'policy' has something to do with it, editors have their own hobby-horses, but editors try to give the readers what they want—or they don't stay editors for long. Science fiction, because so much is expected of it, is more subject to the accusation of monotony than any other form of literature, and rightly so. With all space and time

to venture in, it is a confession of failure that stories in the medium tend to be like a row of sheep playing follow-the-leader.

True, science is catching up with us all the time, but what of it? Science fiction is a form of prophecy and we should be the last to grumble because of the increasing demand for accuracy. Stories must be logical within the framework of accepted fact. If they are not logical then the story isn't science fiction, it is fantasy. There is nothing wrong with fantasy; personally I don't think that there is enough of it, but even fantasy must abide by its own logic.

The old-time stories now appear to be slightly ludicrous, not because of their concepts, but because of their characters. Their science may appear to be off-key, but that is only because we now know better, the fact remains that in the old-time magazines almost every story was different to its companions. Authors appeared to write them because they had an idea and wanted to get it down on paper. It was only when the field crystallised that the rot set in, the narrowing of imagination, the taboos and must-nots, the shying away from the bold idea to the comparative safety of precedent. Don't misunderstand me here, I am the last to advocate sex or sadism as the means to liven up the stories. Science fiction has so far remained clean, let's keep it that way. There is nothing clever or desirable in taking advantage of the freedom of the field to exploit our own wish-fulfillments, erotic dreams, and frustrations. I have never yet read a sex-loaded science fiction story without the feeling that it would have been far better without the 'spice.' To rely on dirt to sell such a story is an even bigger confession of failure than humbly following in the footsteps of the successful.

That is the vicious circle I was talking about a while ago, the spiral route of diminishing returns to the final point of oblivion. The quickest way to kill science fiction is by trying to imitate the successful and that is what authors do who 'study the market.' They can only write similar stories to those which have *already appeared in print*. Consciously or subconsciously they tend to imitate and, while imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, yet it can only result in material inferior to the original.

Ridiculous !

I wonder ?

Because, you know, *something* must have caused the decline in the popularity of science fiction.

'Studying the market' perhaps ?

—E. C. Tubb



He was one of the last Irishmen left alive—one of the few remaining men on earth, in fact—which might have accounted for his wildness. In a way he was lucky, for when the Martians landed there was much that Sheamus could teach them although it certainly wasn't his fault that the atmosphere upset Martian metabolism.

SHEAMUS

By MARTIN JORDAN

Illustrated by QUINN

I.

Sheamus squatted beside the heap of stones by the lough and gazed with satisfaction at the green hillside against whose ruffled cheek he had fashioned the word MAN. The activity had been enormously interesting; it was the first time he had formed a word since his body had grown the thews of adulthood; that is, if you could call it writing—this tracing of twelve-foot-long letters with white stones.

His breath back, he gathered another armful and attacked the slope, the sea-wind spreading his hair and threatening to blow his shadow from the turf. Seen close he was a fine figure, with his pelt loincloth and tanned skin and dark eyes; but from the point of view of the clouds he was a living speck on the grass-green, rock-grey and otherwise tenantless crust.

By noon he had finished another word. The message now read :
MAN HERE.

Sheamus had never seen aircraft, but the sight of one would not have surprised him. He held the past of mankind lightly and subconsciously inside his head. All through his childhood there had been Michael Doonan with his tales of women and cities—especially women—and somewhere in the pattern were spaceships that joined worlds and atmosphere-flyers linking cities. Ever since he had heard a strange sound in the sky he had accepted the idea that people, when they came, would not be toiling over the Sheefry Hills but swooping triumphant from above.

It had happened in the Spring. He had been inside the hut, and the sound had come without warning, like the whole sky being sick. He had hurried out; there had been nothing but a cut in the clouds as if a sleeping giant had woken up and waved his crutch, the turmoil returning to silence in layer upon layer of echoes.

Man Here. He walked round the bland stones, bracing his body against the slope, and suddenly the last cloud fled, the world lay under a clear sky and he felt the empty horizons crouching behind the valley and the lough. There were no birds. Rabbits overran the land and fish swam in the sea. And there was a man—here.

The clay and wattle cabin lay on the landward side, just under the brow, where a grassy road followed the contours and an old signpost stood. The wood had rotted, and Sheamus had replanted it so often that it had become a mere stump, its crosspiece tilted drunkenly at the ground :

DUBLIN—160 miles.

He went into the cabin and shut the door, and the discontent that had visited him on the hill was shut in. He went out again, closing the door behind him; the wind found his face, but the discontent had followed him.

"I'll be mending the boat," he said to Shebag. "It's all a month since we ate fish."

"A rabbit I'll be myself," he told her, "if the ferret gets our dinner a day longer."

"I did hear," he said, "from the great Mike Doonan; when I was a little boy, that they had rats lepping bold as lapdogs in the city of Dublin. But a rat is not good eating."

To all this Shebag made no reply; which was not surprising because she was a statue. Five feet high and made of clay, she gazed with scooped-out eyes at the humpbacked islets of the bay.

Sheamus had made her some years before—Sheamus, who had seen no woman since the first moments of his life. The art that had formed her had been nourished not on observation but innate, ingrown know-

ledge. The head was a shapelessness, but belonged darkly to the trunk; the limbs were blunt as faggots, yet the body had some subtlety of curve about it that was a blind, accurate groping after femininity.

"A poor clay creature you are without a flower to your hair," said Sheamus, and he picked a spray of oblong-leaved spurge that grew nearby and spat on a piece of clay and fastened the spurge behind her rudimentary ear with the dollup of mud.

"Now it's a woman entire, all white and warm where a man seeks, and enough love in her, would make you sing for all with the taste of one only hour; and so fixed on a man's comfort, with the table's ribs boned white by the scrubbing and pots ashine better than beacons. Fine and busy she is, greeting a man with lips so clinging and red, you'd think she'd lain all day idle with wishing, yet there's a stew on the hob to twitch the stone nose of the Bellacragh itself. And as she ladles the stuff she speaks kisses—"

The sky suddenly screamed with power. He rushed round the cabin. The hills were motionless, but it was as if something huge and shy had been in movement and now that he was looking had frozen itself like a monster mouse. He sensed that the air had been cleanly slashed by some projectile.

Then a haze of vapour grew from the menziesia on the opposite summit, and he ran.

Downhill, braking muscles to prevent himself from slipping; past "Man Here," into the valley and around the banks of the lough, his breath, more from anger than exertion, coming fast. For there—a few yards flapping for a bird—lay the palpable sign of life, and he, Sheamus had to toil down one hill and up another . . .

He tackled the farther slope with great strides, its curvature cutting the summit from view. He could feel in his legs when the hill finished. Menziesias and clumps of spurge and a few thorns, gnarled and hounded by wind—otherwise nothing—the hills sitting round in a circle under a pale sky.

He remembered to draw his knife—Mike Doonan's knife—as he advanced into the thorns. There was, after all, a gleam of something . . .

He parted the branches and stared at the thing for minutes. He was not like a savage confronted for the first time by some mechanical marvel; inside him grew the rooted cultivation of Doonan with its memories of machines bigger than this. Sheamus just stood and savoured.

It was a circular saucer-like object lying on the ground, about six feet thick at the hub, tapering to twelve inches at the rim; in colour silver, in texture smooth, in size perhaps a circle of five yards radius.

He walked round it and felt the metal, which was hard and slightly hot, and tapped with his fist.

"Hi!" he called.

Then, towards the hub, arose two arms of jointed steel, surmounted by two round eyes as big as saucers, ineffably dark and doglike. One travelled to within a yard of Sheamus and stopped. The other moved out past his shoulder and squinted back to view his rear portions. In their depths, lambent with electronics, he glimpsed his mirrored self made small.

The scrutiny lasted for perhaps thirty seconds, and Sheamus felt his dignity evaporating. He shouted again and pounded at the saucer; cast troubled glances, first at one eye, then at the other; until at last the tension broke and he picked up a stone and drew back his arm to fling it at the dumb orb that hovered before his face.

What followed was so quick that Sheamus only knew the sequence in retrospect. Whilst time took a single pace, the saucer rose from the ground and leaped over the far horizon; and this with a banshee wail that scalded the eardrums and wind enough to flatten the thorns. The surprise and pressure alike hit Sheamus; he found himself breathlessly lying halfway down the hill; and as he sat up and groaned at the assault on his flesh the world was full of sound, and only gradually, like the diminuendo of a fading toothache, did the familiar reassert itself—the distant lapping of the sea and the sigh of the wind.

2.

Orcus-78 sat at the controls and watched the surface of the planet unroll in the viewing-screen. He was a typically thin-chested Martian of about thirty, with scanty hair, a dead-white complexion and a trace of acne.

The acceleration of the saucer was nicely balanced by contra-forces imparted by the spinning hull; he was untroubled by the ten gravities that pressed upon him—only slightly pensive with indigestion.

He took a wallet from a recess. Inside, plaspex-covered, docketed, were rows upon rows of pills. Remedies for all complaints, including hunger and thirst—including, even, the wish for simple intoxication. He selected the prescription for his dyspepsis and swallowed it.

Such was the speed of the saucer that the city was already beneath when he replaced the wallet. He had had no time to think of the native encountered on the hill.

He cut the enzoning beam that tied him to a magnetic line of force. The saucer hovered on its antigravs and came to rest on the smooth ebonite of the spaceport beside the fast-flowing Liffey.

The saucer had no airlock. He got his earthsuit out of a locker and climbed into the stiff garment, screwing on the transparent headpiece. Only then did he operate the hatch.

As he slid to the ground a maintenance-robot came walking on air from the hangars, ready to reseal the saucer and pump out the toxic Earth-atmosphere. But first the robot made a routine hull-check, rising on its antigravs and walking slowly over the saucer, its steel feet never touching the silvery surface.

Orcus-78 strolled across the ebonite to his personal beetle. His nose itched inside the headpiece. The pill had barely touched the tight vesical of wind inside him. Colonial life, he told himself, was hard. Its worst feature was having to wear an earthsuit whenever you went outside the city dome. When you wore an earthsuit something started to itch and you couldn't do anything to stop it . . .

Not for the first time he began to think about earth-air. Its composition was certainly different from the Martian atmosphere which the filter-plants duplicated inside the city. Yet it was not *fatal* to a Martian—once he had breathed it himself for an experimental ten minutes. The effect? It was a guilty exercise to recall the effect, even to himself. Earth-air was poisonous, yet poisonously desirable . . .

The poisonous part was the Aphrophon, of course—excess oxygen also, but mainly the Aphrophon. What was it he had heard the Vivippy say? It had been on Elysium Avenue, and he had caught the remark as two painted Vivippies passed arm in arm: "Aphrophon is what puts sex into a Martian."

He climbed into the beetle and drove sadly off the ebonite and onto the long ribbon that ended at Mars City. The city was a glassoid bubble of two miles radius. Beneath the huge dome the buildings gleamed between strips of green.

His monowheeled beetle rolled up to the quartz wall, through the outside doorway of the airlock and into the inner. It took nearly a minute for the robots to pump Earth-air from the lock and flood it with Mars-air, but then the inner door opened and Orcus-78 drove into the city.

The first thing he did was to stop, remove his earth-suit and scratch his nose. Then he called Scandia-92, to whom he was engaged to be mated, on his wrist-radio.

"Scandia? It's Orcus."

"You're just in time for mid-day pills," she said.

"The usual place? I'll be right over." He added: "I saw an Earthman."

"An Earthman? Where?"

"Not two hundred miles from here."

"My department will be pleased."

As he drove the beetle towards the public eatery he thought, not of the Earthman, but of Scandia-92. She was an unusual type—a Vivippy with neuter status. He hoped their mating would be a success, uncomplicated by sex. But he was no neuter himself, and already he had detected a slight derangement of his libido when in her company.

The Martian society was in the throes of a biological revolution—a slow one, growing in terms of centuries. It had begun with the discovery of a method of breeding humans in the laboratory. At present a point had been reached when eighty per cent of Martian young grew pre-natally in test-tubes—were not born at all in the ancient sense, but decanted. Orcus himself had originated in the Public hatchery. Scandia, on the other hand, had been given life laboriously by the historic method—a bored couple having co-operated to that end on one of the more tedious outposts of Mars. Added to which, Scandia was a Vivippy.

There were two sorts of Martian women—Neuters and Vivippies. Most were Neuters. The thin air and deserts of Mars had in any case reduced procreation to a mere seasonal flurry, and a two hundred years holiday from motherhood had helped to complete the process: a New Woman emerged with the faintest rudiments of femininity and no urges.

But the ancestral type of fully fashioned womanhood still survived, if on a lessening scale. Most Vivippies were natural-born, had low intelligence-ratings and found places in video-entertainment or certain establishments that catered for the rather outmoded and rare phenomenon of male concupiscence.

There was, of course, the occasional high-rated Vivippy. She would usually fit without trouble into the hierarchy of science or industry, and however physically striking her viviparousness, manage to serve the state as ably as her neuter sister.

The taking of mid-day pills was a social occasion accompanied by conversation and music. Most people assimilated an amount of rough-age at the same time—yeasts and brans of various types. Gastronomy was an art that had not survived the first tough centuries of colonisation on Mars itself, and was certainly not present in the re-colonisation of Earth.

Orcus found Scandia at the eatery for the over-seventies on Erythraeum Prospect. It was a plain, pastel place. Lower ratings had continuous eatery-video laid on. The higher groupings of intelligence were expected to eat to the improving sounds of philosophy.

Scandia got up as Orcus approached and waited until he had seated himself before resuming her place. This was because his rating was lower than her own. To have a really low intelligence—down in the fifties for instance—meant enormous consideration from almost everyone—the proffered seat in the public beetle, queue priority, even courtesy from the traffic robots. In a system based on the grading of intelligence this was a social balance. But the custom had outlived its logic, and now the only way to honour an inferior was to insult him, and politeness to an equal was a form of rudeness.

As Orcus and Scandia were an engaged couple, their relationship was exceptionally formal. Mating was permitted between males and females of roughly similar rating as long as no physical relationship was involved. The intellectual achievements of the parties would henceforth be joint productions.

When Scandia was seated she listened to the account of the Earthman with growing interest.

"That's good," she said. "Dardanus-104 is on the warpath and I hear he's going to lecture you field-anthropologists this afternoon on the lack of specimens. Perhaps you'll be good enough to tell him about the Earthman *before* he starts to talk."

"Yes, I will."

"Thank you." She inclined her head. "What did this savage look like?"

"Humanoid, of course, but quite disgusting. I noticed particularly the size of his chest."

"That would be the oxygen. He probably takes enough with each breath to keep a Martian for a week."

"Then the colour of the skin. Pigmented. The sun, I suppose. I wonder what he's been living on all these years. *Meat*, do you think?"

"Queer," Scandia mused, "that what one's used to seeing in a textbook is so incredible in real life. I expect he *does* eat meat. After all, our remote ancestors . . ."

She frowned. "Now don't forget to tell Dardanus about him in good time."

Flattered by the peremptoriness of her tone, he watched her as she swallowed her pills. She looked cool and efficient in her plaston smock; her neck rose from the shoulders like a snow-column; the small head was balanced to perfection by the brown hair that flowed beyond the nape as if frozen in a polar breeze. He was disturbed to note that his admiration was not completely devoid of forbidden feeling. Wide heavens, he cautioned himself—she was to be his *mate* ! It was possible to think like that about *other* Vivippies, but to link *Scandia* with *that* . . . it was like thinking of ones . . .

"Mother" would have been the term had Orcus not begun his life, like nearly everyone else, by being decanted from a bottle. He had no word; he finished the thought with a blush.

And as she chewed her bran, Scandia gazed at the man who would soon be sharing her most intimate activities—everything, she pondered, from the arrangement of the exhibits in the Anthropological Museum to the paper on Comparative Mores on which she was now engaged.

She sighed. It was a great step for a girl to take.

On Elysium Avenue were the shops and places of entertainment. Nothing much happened there. House-robots did the marketing. The number of under-fifty intelligencies in the city was too small to fill all the video-halls.

The Museum of Anthropology was a white cube fronting Erythraeum Prospect. Like most centres of culture it was dense with people.

The main hall held thousands of cases, each containing an item of Earth-culture. It was a display of furniture, ceramics, pots, pans, flywheels and pitch-forks. On the whole, ironmongery predominated. When the first Martians had landed the cities were still fairly intact, but the dampness of the new atmosphere had caused textiles to moulder and destroyed all the books.

It seemed obvious that the inhabitants of Earth, before they had killed themselves with such spectacular thoroughness, had all been viviparous. The absence of hatcheries was evidence. Biologically they had not advanced like the Martians . . .

A robot spoke these facts as it handed students from case to case. It was a thin rod, rising from a free-rolling ball, its head a lisping loud-speaker. In engineering, it said, Earth had not progressed either.

True, the twenty-first century had brought space-flight and the first colonies on Mars (the colonies, ladies and gentlemen, from which our own great culture has descended) but the centuries that followed brought war and decay. Take, for sufficient example, the clumsy cobalt bomb, the last experiment which had robbed Earth temporarily of her atmosphere and killed in one stroke the whole world-population.

In a little room nearby the Director droned into the last stage of his speech. Many of his listeners were post-prandially asleep. Even Orcus, keyed as he was into the fuller social status that would attend his mating with Scandia, found it hard to give the eminent scientist all his attention. Sitting there with his stomach full of bran, the pill-given chemicals creeping like lava through his veins, he saw Dardanus's beak-like nose, his no less bird-like chest, the brittle arm that waved in the thin air, tracing patterns of world-catastrophe.



"It's certain," Dardanus was saying, "that the cobalt bomb, so incontinently exploded twenty-five years ago in the Pacific Ocean, robbed the planet of its atmosphere for at least thirty minutes. There's no need for me to recall the causes—superheating of the ionosphere, followed by elevation of the heavier atoms and a partial band of vacuum encircling the globe. It's possible that at least half the molecules existing at that time reached escape-velocity and were lost into outer space . . .

"However, we are anthropologists, not physicists; we are interested not in the fate of atoms, but of man. It is inconceivable that the whole Earth-human race perished. There must, for instance, have been people in spacesuits, people in bathyspheres, people undergoing operations—people, that is, with enough stored oxygen at hand to see

them through the period of loss. Those are the people we have been trying to find—so far without success.”

He spoke of the continent-wide searches. It was astonishing that a native had never been found; the Statistical Department had postulated at least one to every square thousand miles. Accordingly there was a live native within five minutes flight of Mars City; he—or she—existed as surely as the nose on his face. Why had he—or she—not been found? Could it be—and here he spoke with the full deference due to inferiors—that the efforts of the field-anthropologists had . . . lacked full zeal? Perhaps . . .

Orcus woke up with a jerk. Great Phobos! He had forgotten to tell Dardanus about the Earthman! He shot from his seat.

When the story had been blurted Dardanus snapped:

“And why, by Diemos and the Asteroids, didn’t you say so before, you halfwit?”

Orcus flushed with pleasure.

It was night, and Scandia and Orcus were outside the city in their earthsuits. They had been examining the Immunity Suit in which Scandia would travel next morning on her hunt for the Earthman.

By virtue of her rating, and as curator of the Anthropological Museum, the task of hunting down the Earthman was hers.

The city dome—that immense glassoid bubble—was invisible in the starlight. Faint greenish bands followed the line of the horizon, fading into an ambient clearness that was the atmosphere of Earth unpolluted by man.

The Immunity Suit—a capsule comfortable as a womb—was in order.

“I’ll have it parked by the airlock,” Scandia said, “so that I can get in without wearing an earthsuit.”

“You’ll have to hold your breath.”

“Not for long. Besides, just one or two whiffs of Earth-atmosphere can’t do any harm.”

“Just what do you know about Earth-atmosphere?”

She looked at him, puzzled. “As much as everybody else, I suppose. That it’s twenty-five per cent oxygen—far too much for a Martian—and that it’s got traces of certain gases—Aphrophon, for instance—that play havoc with a Martian . . . constitution.”

“What sort of havoc?”

“Aphrophon,” she said evenly, “is, of course, a strong aphrodisiac. It’s probable that this planet didn’t have it before the bomb. It seems to have been a by-product of fission.”

He said: “I *did* know all that.”

"Then I expect you had your own reasons for asking me about it," she answered politely.

"Scandia . . ." he said. Suddenly he unscrewed his headpiece and stood looking at her, slowly breathing the alien air. "Have you ever done this?"

She was startled. "Certainly not! The air's most toxic. Screw it back at once, Orcus . . . if you wouldn't mind."

He breathed deeply and staggered a little. "I did it once before. The effect is . . . extraordinary. It makes things . . . look different. Things and . . . people. And something else. It gives something else."

"What else?"

"An additional meaning."

"For Phobos' sake! It would oblige me if you'd put back your headpiece."

He had come unusually close to her—her acute mind leaped at the reason—and his manner was altogether informal. She was thankful when at last he screwed on the dome. She resolved to report the incident to the Director of Moral Welfare. Perhaps, after all, Orcus was too orectic for mating . . .

They exchanged no more words while they waited for the robots to work the airlock. She glanced at him. Could it be that Orcus was slipping below his rating? She had heard tales of Earth-air picnics amongst the low-rated males and the Vivippies—orgies, almost. As a fully adult rating she had paid no attention, but . . .

His action had disturbed her and she was relieved when they parted at the inner lock. She began to look forward to the morning and the solitary trip across country in the "Immunity." There was nothing hazardous about the trip, which was in every way routine. The Immunity, as an invention, made hunting safer than crossing Elysium Avenue; it had been used against the fierce carnivorae of Venus with complete success. It was almost boringly efficient. And even in the unlikely event of mishap there were the signal-beams to bring up the patrol-robots . . .

Still, the Immunity would be a change; and a change, perhaps, was what she needed.

Orcus did not see Scandia depart in the Immunity next morning. He swallowed his early-pills and ate several scoopfuls of wheat-germ, less from hunger than to stifle a guilty feeling inside him. However, in spite of his awareness of last night's indiscretion, he was surprised, when he reached the Museum, to find a summons awaiting him to attend the Director of Moral Welfare.

Protonilus-130 was one of the most important men in Mars City. In aspect he was bull-like, square and towering. His voice was high, and he had pink, plump hands like a giant baby's. His short hair was soft and fluffy and cut with a trace of tonsure.

He showed Orcus to a seat in front of his desk with the greatest deference and asked if he were comfortable. Orcus nodded miserably.

"You are engaged to a senior scientist of high rating—Scandia-92?"

"Yes."

"The lady is viviparous, is she not?"

"Oh, yes."

"But you agree, of course, that it would be quite antisocial to take the slightest notice of . . . her physical disadvantage?"

"Definitely, yes."

"I ask these questions," Protonilus said, folding his hands, "because there has been a complaint . . ."

"An unfortunate incident, but isolated," Orcus said feebly. "The Earth-night . . . the stars were out, you know . . . *That*, and her primitive shape . . ."

"I appreciate," Protonilus said soothingly, "that our presence here on the ancestral planet reminds many of us of what we once were. But the biological crudities of past ages are one thing—a senior anthropologist with an intelligence-rating of ninety-two is another."

"I know."

"Let me also remind you of the delicate position of the high-rated but viviparous female. She belongs to a lower—fortunately a vanishing—type, but she has managed to become a useful member of society."

"Quite," Orcus said blushing.

"I admit," the Director went on, "that the reproductive instinct hasn't entirely left us. It will! It will! Meanwhile one does well to remember the impossible situation that once existed. A few centuries ago"—he waved his hands—"women were just polishers of floors and bearers of children. They gave birth, and in between the births they messed with food-getting and house-cleaning. Work, in other words, for the simpler sort of machines! Yet many of those women must have rated the eighties or nineties. What a squandering of human riches *that* was!"

"Incredible," Orcus nodded.

"As you say," Protonilus agreed, "and it's hard on a self-respecting female to be reminded of it. Scandia-92 needs the disinterestedness and indifference of a good mate, and I'm afraid your own qualifications don't quite seem . . ."

3.

Sheamus arose from his straw bed and went to splash in the lough. The soreness of his limbs reminded him of the saucer. The world was wide—gave too much space to things that slipped out of reach—and his arms were too short for plucking fleeing life from the lip of the horizon.

He was sad when he came back to the cabin, the droplets wet on his shoulders. This morning he wanted intensely to hear a voice other than his own.

Out of the strange fund of memories in his head—those memories of the scarcely-experienced—he tried to recall a woman's voice. It was higher, of course, more musical than a man's . . .

"If you could talk," he said to Shebag, "it's a better sort of creature you'd be."

He glowered at the unmoved clay.

"Sure, it's your silence that depresses me."

"Silence, do you hear? Lump of the claypit you are, and no woman at all!"

"... And the great Mike Doonan did say as how women were wonderful talkers."

"What have you got for a man, with your dumb lips? To the doorpost I might as well be jawing about the numbers of fishes in the sea, or go visiting the mossy hour stones on Clare to ask them the time of day. Ah, you're only a mud-thing!"

And he gave Shebag such a blow that the statue reeled, and cleanly parting at the hair-line of an old and hidden fault, the head fell from the neck and rolled mutely to a corner of the cabin.

"Now goodbye to childishness," Sheamus said with gloomy satisfaction. "A man must take what of reality offers, and not go shaping mud-and-dribble into dream-stuff." And he forced himself to notice his hunger. He had promised Shebag to fish today, but in half-conscious rebellion against the decision he determined to take out the ferret and catch the usual rabbit instead.

As he left the spot a nagging repentance made him turn. With a casualness meant to deceive himself he picked up the head and replaced it gingerly on the neck. It fitted closely; he balanced it and went down the hill without looking back.

He was on the windy slope, having crept up to the warrens. He had stopped all holes but one, taken his ferret out of the bag, attached the string and waited; and now a sleekly dead rabbit beside him told of the ferret's skill, if not his own. His eyes, his whole attention, were

fixed downward to the earth when the Immunity came out of the sky and paralysed him with its ray.

As he jerked himself over upon his back he felt his body become a sack of bones with no sense left save sight. He gazed at the descending Immunity.

"And me the king of Mayo itself!" he marvelled.

It hovered a few feet above him on its antigravs. It was a glassoid capsule, large enough to hold a human. He could not see if anyone stood within—only a greyness that gave an illusion of boiling smoke when sun or shadow painted it. The surface was pimpled with nozzles, barrels and antennae, as thick as the horns of an old-world sea mine that Sheamus had once found on Murrisk sands.

The thing had pounced from the cover of the sunward sky. He thought of the saucer of yesterday. Then it had been he, Sheamus, who had done the stalking. Now it was this strange thing—this man-sized and airborne bean—that had sought him out and held him fast.

"Will you please give back a man his own limbs?" Sheamus groaned at the capsule.

The thing clucked faintly. A pair of electronic eyes on stalks hovered disdainfully; then Sheamus felt himself sucked from the ground by an invisible agency, turned over in mid-air and dumped unceremoniously onto his stomach, whilst the eye presumably scanned his rear aspect. Soon, the capsule's curiosity satisfied, he felt his body rising to an orthogonal position, and, whilst the paralysis gradually left his members, he found himself standing up. At once he began to sprint seaward, but a sudden pain at the base of the spine halted him. The thing came sailing up, a rampant pellet, and Scandia's slightly amplified voice came from it:

"Follow me!"

Keeping about three feet from the ground the capsule moved towards the Sheefry Hills, and Sheamus followed willy-nilly, as if unseen elastic tethered him to it, the compulsion-beam drawing slight bulges from his flesh. Now and then he was forced to leap, but the beam seemed to cushion his inertia with agencies invisible and pneumatic. Nevertheless he was soon out of breath, for he had disdained to save it by stopping his talk.

"A king, is it?" he ruminated. "And me living lonely with a statue and wishing her a limber girl to walk the world with; shying stones at the night and saying curses . . . And now it's the end of me."

The capsule jerked him bouncingly over a dune; he scrabbled with his bare toes and went on:

"Will you quit stretching the earth between us like a watchspring? Where is it you're taking me in holy Ireland?"

"Mars City," Scandia answered.

The voice he heard had a metallic sound; yet it was higher than the remembered tones of Michael Doonan and more musical.

"And where might Mars City be, if it's a place at all and not an illness in my head, as you might be yourself?"

"A city on a river at the other coast, south-east of this a hundred and sixty of your miles."

"That might be Dublin by an outland name; but there's a slice of country between would destroy a man, and he with one rabbit-skin against the cold."

"You talk a lot," Scandia told him, "but say very little."

Somehow this native did not impress her as an inferior and she paid him the compliment of rudeness without a qualm.

Sheamus carried a bag in one hand and the rabbit by the ears in the other. He swung the bag, in which lay the ferret quiet, and tried to match his steps with the rhythmical suction of the beam.

"And what will they be after with me in the city of Dublin—that was?"

"You will be the first native Earthman captured for study. You'll be examined morphologically, psi-tested and electroencephalographed."

"They seem to have found a fine line of talk in Dublin," Sheamus said. "But company is company, however outlandish, and it's men they are, perhaps, and not floating contraptions such as yourself?"

"As to that," she answered, "this is only a machine, you know. I am inside it—a Martian of female sex—a senior anthropologist with an intelligence-rating of ninety-two."

"A woman, you're telling me? And of an age, might I ask, fit to scald the heart out of a man?"

There was a silence; then her voice came, rather startled in tone.

"On Earth-chronology I am twenty-eight."

"No age at all! A grand, hardy girl—would knock the heads together of any two men left in the world! But why not come down from that airbox into the light of day?"

"That is quite impossible. We Martians can't breathe the air of Earth—only our own Martian air."

"Well, that's a hard thing, to be boxed up," Sheamus told her, "till no teeth are in your mouth and the bright hair of you turned to grey."

"It's not at all like that. I don't of course, stay in the Immunity once I pass from the airlock into the city."

"It's rising I see you from it," Sheamus ecstatically said, spreading his hands the better to catch the vision and stubbing his toe on a ground root, "like a blessed angel with red lips puckered to kiss the sun . . . and . . ." he groped for the words and found them, ". . . blossoms in your shining gown."

"Really," Scandia said, "it's fortunate that I graduated early in semantics, or I'd find your imagery too alien for understanding. As it is, I can see that your style is *poetic*, which is an archaic verbal device of letting sound and symbol swallow sense. There's also an epidemic quality about it; since listening to you I'm surely less disciplined in speech myself."

He assured her that her words were jewels and her voice a priceless music. "But how is it," he finished, "that you speak good English, and you a Martian and no woman of Earth?"

"The Martian colonists came from Earth in the first place—from a continent called America. That was many centuries ago, but English has always been the official language of Mars."

"And what thing is it that you ride in just like a sparrow?"

"This is an Immunity—short for 'Immunity Suit.' Just a vehicle for hunting."

All this time, behind the levitated capsule, the invisibly hauled Sheamus had been breasting the foothills, the sea to his broad back. He now wiped the sweat from his eyes with an unbloodied bit of the rabbit and appealed to Scandia:

"Now you can't be walking me all the way to Dublin, not caring if a man fasted or was fed? Here's a rabbit as good as ever chewed grass, and you'll be dragging my dead body beyond unless I have him cooking on a bit of fire this minute."

"Interesting!" Scandia announced. "I've never seen the culinary ceremonies of carnivora. Yes—you may eat the rabbit and I'll watch to see how you do it." Forthwith she halted the Immunity, the compulsion-field dwindled and Sheamus was able to skin and draw the rabbit and gather green sticks from the furze. Soon a fire was burning, the rabbit dangling from the apex of a tripod he had rigged above the fiery middle.

"Will you be having a taste yourself," Sheamus asked, "or do the likes of you dine on desolation or the plain spice of air?"

Scandia was busy already with her pill-wallet. She said: "As a matter of fact, I'm taking nourishment of my own."

"And what prime eatables have you in the thing?"

"A series of protein pills, giving carbohydrate and antiscorbutic coverage for eight hours on an energy-spendage of a hundred ergs per—"

"God save us, will you stop?" Sheamus interrupted. "For you'll be insulting this rabbit, with the smell of him enough to woo the water from the mouth of a dead soul." The rabbit was, in fact, starting to crackle appetisingly, and he went on: "Why not poke the lovely head of you out of that contraption and sniff the scent he makes in the world?"

"Twenty-five per cent oxygen, especially enriched by the gross smell of roasting flesh, would be too much for *me*!"

"Oh my grief," said Sheamus, who was thinking cunningly of a plan, "one only sniff would show you the soreness of fasting on pills! Why not breathe it now?"

"Oxygen and Aphrophon notwithstanding," Scandia mused, "the occasional direct experience *is* useful to an anthropologist." Thereupon a small panel of about six inches square slid open on the Immunity's surface and her tentative nose appeared. With the quickness of thought Sheamus dropped his hand into the ferret's bag, snatched out the wriggling beast and stuffed it through the little hole into the interior of the Immunity. There came a sound on the speech-mechanism like machine-bearings siezed with diamond dust; the Immunity sprang twenty feet into the air, spun madly and dropped with spiral cavortings to ground level, where the hatch burst open and Scandia shot outwards screaming into Sheamus's waiting arms.

"Shut your yelling!" he said, as he lowered and pinioned with his hands her struggling body by the wrists onto the black earth, covering it with his own to prevent it arching like a bow. "It's a fine girl you are for all, ferret or no ferret." And he planted a strong and avid kiss against Scandia's parted lips.

In the first impact her instincts were all for self-preservation. Her heels drummed; her body heaved. Sheamus kissed her again, long and lingeringly in spite of the turning head and snapping teeth. Through the numbness of shock she heard him panting: "I'm thinking of yourself and me . . . on the shore below . . . living easy." And as she strained away from him: "Destroyed I've been the times sweet winds have been passing . . . and night hanging on the waves."

Gradually logic took control; it was a hard fact that Sheamus's strength was greater than her own, and her muscles ceased their struggles whilst her mind began to construe the problem of defeating him by superior science. Suddenly she realised that she had already taken action to such an end; but straightway a novel sensation of physical pleasure drove such matters from her mind. It was as if the naked environment of the planet into which she had been flung plucked at her and drew music from her fibres with a soft, an incredibly

ancient hand. The air, of which she gulped hapless lungfuls, seemed to spread in quickening fire to her toes, touching each cell into a sudden stable completeness, like the flow of full current along a circuit of swooning lights. The excess oxygen made her breast labour like a bellows; she felt faintly inebriated but so gigantically aware of matter in all its winning aspects of touch, sight and scent that she had the illusion of living for the first time in a pristine present only half-guessed before in hollow dreams.

"I'm a Martian!" she gasped. "The air! I can't . . ."

"It's little you'll mind of Irish or Martian itself when you feel my arms around you and I feeding kisses to your two lips like a blessed . . ."

She lay quiet, listening to the new voices in her blood. She said thoughtfully:

"Do that again. What did you call it? . . . Kiss."

Sheamus replied with a volubility of action more picturesque than words. Against his lips she whispered, more to herself than to him:

"It's becoming clear. The Martian system is the product of natural atrophy, and not volition."

"Is it now?"

"We didn't *decide* to desert our mammalian context—our atmosphere made us."

"You wouldn't say?"

"Do you know, Martian babies are born from *bottles*?"

"Well, a bitter thing that is, would tear the heart from a decent soul!"

She sat up. Her breathing was becoming easier; there was nothing of languor inside her.

"That animal—the rabbit. I'd like to eat a piece of it. But do that . . . kiss me again first."

They sat side by side and ate. The taste of the rabbit seemed to click into her new matrix with a fine certitude of belonging. He grinned at her, his mouth full.

"What do they call you—by what outland name?"

"Scandia."

"Scandia and what else?"

"Scandia-Ninety-two."

"And with me it's one name—Sheamus—though it would be Doonan if you asked me the other."

"You remember your—er—father and mother?"

"Nought of any person but Mike Doonan, who was a man crabbed with love of the dead, and full of words like a forest has splinters—of how the towns stood clean and large and the people so thick you couldn't put a thumb between them . . ."

"Is this man alive now?"

"If he is there's a dozen more years on him, for he went away when I was waist high, and since then there's been only these two feet on all the hills."

"You must have been lonely," she said, melting into his arms as if she had done such a thing all her life.

"But not now."

"This . . . kissing . . . is most Saturnian."

"God save you, there's other things," Sheamus breathed. "For example—"

But she started up, pushing him away and pointing to a rapid dot in the sky that was becoming close. The memory of the near-automatic action she had taken returned fully.

"A patrol-robot! I'd forgotten . . . When you thrust that animal into the Immunity I sent out Signal Six. That brings a robot—and here it comes!"

The robot came waltzing on air from the south-east. It was a burnished monster, eight feet tall, and it had killer's hands of flesh-imitating plastic and an eye-turret all round its head. Magnetic cut-off and antigrav mechanisms enabled it to ride the air like an angel in an Italian primitive. Vague Doonan-learned memories stirred in Sheamus, so that he half expected a trumpet. But all that happened was the descent of the robot between them with a dull clang.

"Saints of glory!" moaned Sheamus, beginning to scramble from the place.

"Sit still," she said. "These Mark Sixes wouldn't hurt a fly, unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you provoke them. It's got one—and only one—response-circuit. It won't attack *you* unless you attack *me*."

"Then it's small damage, seeing that I love the soul of you like water on a green hill."

"And I," she assured him, "feel a most pleasurable derangement of my behaviour-patterns when *you* are near."

"Well then . . ." Sheamus sighed, turning his yearning arms towards her; but immediately the robot vibrated with a whirr of menace and Scandia shouted: "Don't touch me!"

The three sank into immobility.

"Aren't I to touch you at all?" whispered Sheamus.

"It's all very difficult. You see, the robot hasn't anything built-in to distinguish between aggressiveness and . . . affection."

Sheamus stared at the robot warily. The single band it had for eye returned his gaze with a stern twinkle, and a faint hiss came from it like a touchy and metallic swan.

"Is it understanding our speech, you're thinking?"

"Not a word."

"And can't you shoo it away—and you surely the lady and mistress of it?"

"I've no control—it just has that single built-in function."

Sheamus crouched in white-knuckled fixity. "Is it for this I've ploughed a lone scrub across Ireland?" he moaned at last. "To find my lady-love and face her, never touching, till the end of time?"

"Don't behave rashly," she warned him, with a swimming glance of love and anxiety. "It has a blaster in its turret."

"Come walking," he said. "I'll watch to see what manners it has." And he led her over the knolls towards the wattle cabin. Soon he made a subtle move to slip his arm round her waist. The robot hissed loudly and placed itself more squarely between them.

"Be careful—it'll vaporise you if you go too far."

"Vaporise?"

"Make you as nothing."

"I'll knock him to pieces like a tin can!" he raved.

When they reached the cabin she forgot the robot for a moment in surprise at sight of the statue.

"What's this?"

"A clay woman," he said crossly, "that I'd been thinking I'd not have need of."

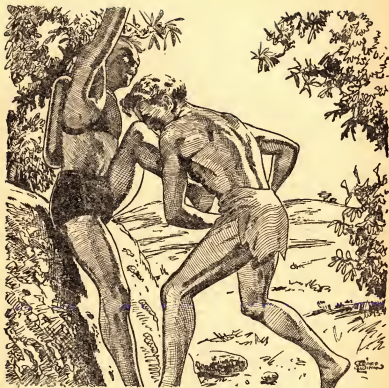
"Artifacts . . . animism . . ." she mused, her anthropologist's interest aroused. She raised a hand and touched the hard-baked head. At once it fell off the neck onto her shoulder and she sprang back with a sharp sound of alarm. There came an urgent splutter from the robot, a hard iridescence shor from its eye-turret and before Sheamus's astonished gaze Shebag slowly crumpled, seemed to melt like snow on embers, until there was nothing left but a smoking spoonful of dust.

Sheamus gaped, himself as unmoving as another statue. He had not realised the power of the robot or the danger he had been in.

At last he groaned: "We'll watch each other's passions for ever, like spring cattle as have the Carrowmore lough between!"

4

As the day passed it was clear that Sheamus's simile exactly described their plight, and by late afternoon they had reached the limit of word and glance as instruments of love and had fallen into a silence less rich than the sad lapping of the sea—for they had wandered to the shore and now sat among the headland rocks.



The robot, that seemingly eschewed food or rest and enjoyed the semi-immortality of a self-lubricating machine, could be defined neither as person nor companion, but as raw presence. All day it had stood or sat within inches of Scandia. It whirred or hissed softly when Sheamus so much as blew his nose. Once in mid-afternoon it opened a door in its own chest and carried out some obscure maintenance; for the rest it was content to exist as a pattern of horribly effortless vigilance.

Sheamus had suggested waiting until night and losing the monster in the hills, but Scandia warned him that its optical equipment was efficient over the whole spectral range.

Now they were sitting frustrated, and Scandia pointed to the slim hulk of Sheamus's boat by the sea edge.

"You've a boat?"

"A stove boat I found by the dead ruins of Dooghbeg."

"You might mend it and fish."

"That I might, but my heart isn't in it whilst rabbits are lepping like grey water on every hill."

"All the same, mend the boat and we'll . . . all go fishing."

He glanced at her; saw that any reason she might have had for the suggestion was not written in her expression. The sun was still high, and he took his gear and set to work with wooden wedges, a mallet and a shaved and pliant board. Afterwards, as he hauled the light keel over the sand, cloud-shadows crossed the wrinkled sea like pools within pools and the great flow of water was calm to where the blue whale of Clare dozed on the horizon.

Warily and with a studied lack of exuberance they ran out the boat together, waded knee-high, floated her and boarded. They drifted with the reaction from the shore. Bemused for the instant by the always-hypnotic experience of putting to sea, they both forgot the robot. She faced him in the bows and smiled as he told her that her eyes were like the rock pools of Portacloy—a mermaid's surely. Then she froze.

"The robot!"

And pointed . . .

Sheamus rattled the rowlocks as he turned.

Apparently the data that had been fed into the robot included nothing marine. It was a yard from their stern, waist-high, advancing with the boat, and it was making a continuous clicking noise; and this internal activity—like a computer with all banks overloaded by an insoluble problem—seemed to intensify as it advanced further into the waves; and as Sheamus thrust in his oars and they shot towards deeper water it began to vanish—the sea closed silently over its head, and the clicking seemed to linger, very muffled and watery for a moment, and was still.

They were alone.

"The sacred wonder of it!" cried Sheamus. "And him after us like an old ferret tracing a rabbit, and laying vexation between myself and the finest woman out of Ireland . . ."

"Quiet," she said. "We haven't much time."

Afterwards, whilst the boat drifted oarless over the calm water, she stirred in his arms and said:

"You must teach me some . . . terrestrial endearments."

"You could call me your Man. Lord save you, it's love-word enough."

When they put in to shore the robot came lumbering out of the waves, a cybernetic Venus. It posted itself in its usual position close to Scandia, and the electronics were flashing in its turret and the clicking had accelerated to a whirr.

"Wild you are," Sheamus mocked, "with us having the wit to duck you in the sea!"

"I'm afraid he's *learning*," Scandia said.

"Ah, we can always take a boat to sizzle the souls of us . . ."

"He *has* his learning-banks; he profits by experience. The sea took him by surprise—he thought he could walk on the water without his antigravs . . ."

"Antigravs?"

"Those are devices for overcoming gravitation. It was found that there was an irrational in the vector-analysis of any moving body in a Newtonian space, but that the equation balanced in a four-dimensional spacetime continuum. The flaw in the Second Law of Motion was expressed as a constant in a new Newton-Einstein unification, and . . ."

"Antigravs are just fine."

"Well, he *couldn't*, of course, walk on top of the sea without using them, and by the time he was well submerged it was too late. But he won't make the same mistake twice." She paused, and added thoughtfully, "That is unless we confuse him . . ."

"How?"

"If we fed him with enough dilemmas something might fuse. Can you swim under water?"

"Like a sleek salmon I can."

"And I," she said, "can hold my breath for a long time because of the low oxygen need of a Martian. Come—do as I do . . ."

And she took off her plaston clothes and ran naked to the sea. "It's a strenuous day I'm having," Sheamus muttered, as he threw aside his pelt and gladly followed.

Pushing the boat, they waded in together. The robot went with them to the edge. The sounds of internal conflict were subdued; it could almost be said that it had made up its circuits. As soon as its steel feet reached the first line of foam it rose on its antigravs with a sound like satisfaction. Sheamus and Scandia, on the other hand, continued into the sea until their heads vanished under the surface and then began to swim.

When, with bursting lungs, Sheamus bobbed up he glimpsed the robot some way off. It was whirring anxiously back and forth looking for them, poised above the surface like a vociferous gadfly. It started to clank as it saw Sheamus and rushed towards him. He dived quickly.

When they surfaced together they were considerably inshore. The robot zoomed straight out of the sun and landed with a splash between them up to its middle. They dived again and swam out to sea . . .

And when at last they waded to shore it was to find the robot rushing fussily up and down and making distressful noises. They dropped and lay panting. The robot came to rest between them. Scandia advanced a finger and felt it. "It's hot," she said hopefully.

"He'll be rightly spavined yet!"

"I think something might have fused already."

"Ah, he's just the remnant of a man!"

"Now . . . a really *fatal* dilemma. Quick! In and out of the water and *bob*!"

Again they pushed out the boat; and this time they stepped off the gunwhale into deep water—scrambled aboard—dived off again—jumped up and down like corks. At one moment Sheamus's head would be seen, at another Scandia's; for long periods nothing was visible except the sea and the increasingly hysterical robot. Its proper position was between the man and woman: now it could not even keep the pair in sight. It half-submerged itself, leaping up into the air again, darting towards the infrequent glimpse of a head above the surface. Soon it lost the humans altogether and rushed around feverishly with its characteristic distress-noises. Then they bobbed up to take breath, entwined together. The robot loosed a ray from its turret which made the piece of sea where it touched boil up in a tall column of steam. Sheamus felt the heat as he shot away, as if a December had turned to August. Scandia! where was Scandia? Her body found his; they climbed into the boat, cold now and shaken, and rowed slowly shorewards.

The robot was missing.

Minutes later it came heavy and dripping from the sea.

"More!" Scandia shouted. She grabbed Sheamus's hand; together they raced yet again to the water.

But a sound unlike any heard before made them turn—in time to see a blue flash! The robot pitched to the sand, alive to nothing save the law of gravitation.

"Dead!" breathed Sheamus as he kissed her eyes, her lips.

"Man," she said. "Man."

"Eve," he said, "My blessed white-skinned Eve."

"This is better than Mars City."

"Ah, get away, there's fancy men there stuck to your door like wasps on a gluepot."

"Not quite," she sighed, thinking with a sudden wry sympathy of the ridiculous Orcus and her recent complaint to the Director of Moral Welfare. Aloud she added :

"We'd better leave this place before they send a search-party."

"Islands," he told her, pointing out the hazy lumps that grew, as if hanging from the heavens, in the vapours of the horizon. "Gort and Kea and Turk and Bofin, and a hundred more."

"Could we live on those?"

"Like kings and queens we could."

And then—"Quick!" she gasped, and pushed him away, so that he fell back on the sand. A rapid dot in the sky was drawing close.

The robot came waltzing from the south-east on its magnetic cut-off and antigravs, and it looked like a sinister angel from some Italian primitive.

It descended between them with a dull clang.

In stunned silence they watched it and heard its comfortable and cooing electronics. Scandia covered her face with two white hands.

"I forgot! I forgot! These patrol-robots have replacement-mechanisms. If something goes wrong with them an automatic signal goes out before the end; and that brings *another* patrol-robot."

"Is it back into the sea for us right away?" Sheamus groaned.

5.

Half an hour later, exhausted and dripping, they surveyed the defunct carapace of the second robot. It had proved tougher than its predecessor; actual sparks had flown from its head before the crowding dilemmas had produced the last fatal fuse and the blue flash.

Scandia rested on Sheamus's bare shoulder, closed her eyes, said : "I could sleep for a week, but we must get away from here before something else happens."

"In the boat?"

"In the Immunity. There's just room for two."

"But where shall we be going—round the cheek of the world in that thing?"

"You talked about islands."

"Then there's gear to be got," Sheamus said, pointing towards the hill behind which lay his cabin. "A man's a soft sort of animal without tools."

"There won't be room. Besides, if we travel we're sure to find some ruins. They're full of tools. At Mars City my museum is crammed with them."

"A fine wealthy place."

"I don't think you'd like Mars City," she frowned. "Except the Vivippies," she added. "The Vivippies are women like me."

"Ah, you're after whetting my appetite; but there's no girl like you, not in the world there isn't."

"I find that extraordinarily satisfying," she told him, her voice muffled inside the plaston smock she was wriggling into. "But those poor girls *are* just like me . . . and they're all frustrated."

"Then it's a deep sleep they're in, the grown men in Mars City."

"Obviously you've never met our . . . men."

The Immunity was balanced, a strange monolith, on the hillside where they had left it. Sheamus followed her through the narrow hatch with some claustrophobic hesitation. But he found that it was impossible to move inside the thing without touching Scandia—a touch being automatically a caress—and the Immunity appealed instantly.

His entrails moved with a sudden, not unpleasurable, flutter as the capsule took the air. He was amazed to find that earth and sky persisted. No walls shut them in. The Immunity's shell was practically invisible—a sort of frozen mist around them—so that the sensation he had of effortless and frictionless passage was heightened by the illusion that nothing palpable lay between them and air. He advanced a finger at the zenith; its tip met the hardness of the shell. He said: "But you can't see it! Invisible it is, like out of a tale of Mike Doonan's!"

"It's one-way chrystallex," she told him. "An induced molecular structure . . . Opaque on the outside, clear on the inside . . . Mm . . ."

He kissed the back of her neck, almost singing with the sheer novelty of the flight. Beneath his feet he saw the drifting sea; a horizon massy with islands; around, the clear reaches of the sky. He laughed into her hair.

"Now you fly it," she said.

"Ah, I couldn't . . ." She noticed that he was panting.

"It's easy." She wriggled to one side. "See this column? It contains nearly the whole works—almost a positronic brain. You just move it the way you want to go and press the top for stopping. But be careful of that. The mechanism looks after deceleration, but it's easy to overshoot the mark. The best way is to—"

She broke off with a squeal of alarm as she felt Sheamus lean against her and his body slump and end grotesquely in a sitting position on the pellucid floor.

She took his jaw in her hands. He was cold, slightly green and quite unconscious.

The air! She operated the small panel through which (was it a hundred years ago?) he had stuffed the ferret. A stiff slab of wind at once rushed in. There was no outlet, but the scanty Martian mixture, which was perpetually being renewed by an abstersive component of the control-stack, would not survive the influx.

Soon Sheamus stirred and woke to her kisses.

"A plodder on hard ground, I am, and no flying man."

"Nonsense, it was just the air. It's better now."

Sheamus gave his head a punch-drunk shake; recovered rapidly and observed that they had not eaten for hours.

"There's only pills."

He swallowed some of the Martian yeast-concentrates.

He pointed to the islands, like sleeping turtles below.

"There's real food—and dusk coming to cheat us of it."

"What sort of food—rabbits?"

"Heaven-fare, and it only hip-berries."

"You take the control-stack," she said.

Somewhat shakily he let the Immunity respond to his touch.

"It's quite impossible to crash," she told him. "Even if you tried, the machine would decelerate."

The Immunity leaped to his pressure. He felt for the first time in his life the sharp delight and mystical fullness of stroking speed out of a perfect machine.

This time it was Scandia who laughed into the nape of his neck.

"Turn," she said, "or we'll lose the islands."

"Will you tell me how this thing works itself?"

"It's complicated. Centuries ago there was a man called Willis or Wills who wrote a story about an alloy called cavorite which had the quality of resisting gravitation. A man in the story built a kind of Immunity of the metal and went to the Moon. The real Immunity's not made of cavorite—it's merely tied with umbilical cords of force to the magnetic poles and contains its own contra-forces for breaking the link at will. Of course it's—"

"Will you stop?" said Sheamus, pointing.

Far beneath on an island the smoke of a fire was rising.

"Natives!" Scandia said. She took the controls from Sheamus and brought the Immunity down through the steely evening; and there in a cove a fire was burning and a solitary man sitting by it, his bearded face a startled oval.

She stopped a yard from the ground. Sheamus was attacking the seamless chryсталlex.

"Don't get out," she warned. "He might be dangerous."

"A whole man and peaceable! Michael Doonan it is, and none other! Will you please be letting . . ."

A moment later they were both out of the Immunity and tending the large, grey man, who had started to crawl away like a lizard and now lay quivering, his eyes closed. He had a rough mat of hair and a beard sawn to stubble; over his doublet of pelt he wore a whole sheep-skin and his legs were cross gartered with strips of hide. When he opened his eyes the face was completed; it belonged to a noble head, massively statuesque—the head of a Roman consul on the trunk of an ancient Briton.

"Ah, Mike, must you be fainting away, when it's awake a man must be to taste the spring of joy? Your Sheamus it is, that you left to juggle lonesome in the inland hills with one only soul against the ebb of night."

The man opened his eyes.

"By all that hops and breathes," he said, in a baritone like an organ-pipe, "it is Sheamus!"

He struggled to the six feet of his height, gilded by the light of the fire, and pointed and laughed shakily.

"And you've got yourself a starship, complete with woman and every convenience." He bowed low to Scandia. "Madam, welcome. I find your presence ironical in the extreme. I presume you are a Martian and not another survivor of our atomic experiments?"

"Sure, there's tales on both sides," Sheamus interrupted. "But it's mazy I am with the queerness and the glory. For the sight and sound of you is Mike Doonan, would persuade a man not blind and deaf, but there's a new way with you that strikes sharp, and it's not the way you weaved words into the wind beyond in the Sheefry Hills."

"My poor laddie, I was creating you! But sit yourselves down; there's some real mutton ready for the fire."

Later, while they sat round the embers digesting the meat and tangy herbs, Michael Doonan began to belch and then to talk.

"Saving your presence, Madam, I confess that I left this Sheamus—then a lad rising twelve—to find myself a woman. For years I'd been waiting impatiently for a peace that wouldn't come . . ."

"The atmosphere of this planet has changed," Scandia said. "The cobalt bomb introduced a new component . . ."

"Which takes a man in his loneliness and makes him mad of love! Well, I found no women, only wild sheep, and after I'd landed here a storm took my boat. Marooned!"

"Ah, it was square payment for leaving a child to the bareness and the anger."

He grinned at Sheamus unrepentant. "I never told you how you and I started. Before the bomb I was an actor, doing plays on video and the soundstrips of poetry-books. On the day of the bomb I was inside Dooghbeg Hospital. You were someone's weak and small baby in an oxygen tent. Everybody died, but I crawled to your tent—and it was me or you—and I shared your oxygen, and it was both of us. I took you into the town until the town began to stink, and then we went to the hills.

"I was half mad with loneliness and love and my head stuffed full of classic plays. You've never heard of Yeats, Synge, Sean O'Casey—you've only heard the living breath of them the way I acted. I slipped through role after role as you grew and grew. It's a fact about classic stage Irishmen that they're all the same man under their diadems and crowns of words. I was a living soundstrip of blarney. But they kept me from going mad—the roles and seeing you grow.

"Shall I tell you the queerest thing? You're the last Irishman. *And I made you!*

"For hundreds of years before the bomb there hadn't been any Irish—just a homogeneous world-population, vaguely called Westerns and Easterns. The Irish were characters in classic plays and poems and antique soundtracks. I made you to think and talk like a playboy of the western world. The last Irishman? Maybe the *first*; maybe you never really existed before outside dreams.

"The only thing I failed in was that you couldn't have a fight. There wasn't anyone to match you with . . ."

He threw a branch onto the fire. The freshened flame showed that Sheamus and Scandia were asleep.

6.

In a circular and windowless room in Mars City Protonilus-130 sat with the Welfare Council and watched the agenda move across a screen, whilst the minutes of the meeting crept on steel tape into positronic secretaries, all green lights and clucking action.

A bald and anile chairman dozed. Protonilus cleared his throat and began to report.

"A quiet week in Moral Welfare. Three Vivippies have had heart attacks. The cause was traced to a small puncture in the city dome, which had been repaired at once by the maintenance-robots.

"I'm going to dissolve an engagement between a field-anthropologist, Orcus-78 and the curator of the anthropological museum. The latter, Scandia-92, is an eminent lady of natural origins—viviparous, poor thing, but her social orientation's always perfect. The male, on

the other hand, showed recently that he found her attractive for other purposes than marriage. An unsavoury incident . . ."

"The computers, by the way, speak so well of this lady that I've arranged with my colleague, Dardanus-104 for her transfer to the Directorate of Moral Welfare. She'll be the first Vivippy ever to be so honoured."

The chairman stirred and croaked: "Needs a mate. Two heads better than one . . ." and the machines swallowed his comment with winking lights and a clatter.

"True," Protonilus said. "I didn't think the point worth mentioning, but I'm mating with the lady myself. She is at present on a hunting trip. She'll be told on her return."

Dardanus-104 sat up with a jerk.

"I've just remembered," he said. "She's lost."

"Lost? How?"

"I don't know. I merely heard the rumour from Central."

"Investigate," the chairman told the machine, which droned and chumbled and at last announced in brisk, metallic tones that two burnt-out robots lay on Clew Beach with no Scandia and no Immunity.

Other facts followed: the figure of a wild man in a rabbit skin began to loom in the story.

"It's obvious," Dardanus said when the machine had finished, "that an anthropologist *with* a blaster—certainly with a blaster—must be sent at once."

"I disagree," Protonilus answered. "The lady is viviparous. For some unknown reason she has been persuaded to leave the Immunity Suit. There's a wild man in rabbit skins abroad. Also the ambient Aphrophon. It's a Moral Situation, and falls to my department. As a matter of fact, as the subject's future mate, I propose to go myself."

In the dawn they had found themselves cold beside the dead fire, and Doonan had brought them porridge in a pot.

"My own grain," said he.

Over breakfast they resolved to fetch Sheamus's boat from the mainland. The Immunity would not hold three persons; accordingly Sheamus and Scandia proposed to reconnoitre the spot where the robots lay, and if no Martians were apparent tow the boat to the island by means of the compulsion-beam.

Sheamus took the control-stack, gradually getting used to the feel of the capsule.

The land lay under ribs of lucent vapour with grave hilltops etched above them. The sea crawled towards the land, blanched grey. Tiny and soundless foam ran up the sands, trivial as the edge of a puddle

Sheamus brought down the Immunity and the scene hardened into reality—the waves looked wet, sounds grew; and there on the sands gleamed the two defunct robots.

He made a perfect landing near the boat.

"You needn't have done that. The beam will pull the boat into the water."

"But I'm thinking of my cabin and all the tools, so shaped to the hand would get a monkey limning bookshelves."

"I told you before—there's no room."

"Ah, but those tools—"

"You're really very obstinate."

"Perhaps it's a pale bit of gloam you think I am, to leap up solid when she becks but stay a ghost when the loud girl wants it other?"

"But I tell you—"

"The woman's telling me," he said, "and a fine tongue involved, would tempt a mouse from the grain and a maggot from a berry. But mice and maggots never saw such tools!" And he got out and stalked off in the direction of the cabin, leaving her to examine the unpractised sensation of wrath.

It would serve him right, she thought, if she took herself, the Immunity and the boat, and . . .

She sat on a rock. The illogic was bewildering; she loved each black hair of him and longed to hurt him. She made her hand into a fist and thought of striking him.

She had struck him in imagination and was kissing the hurt when the Immunity dropped from the sky and came to rest beside her own. The hatch swung open majestically. Protonilus-130, wearing an earthsuit and headpiece, stepped out with his unimpassioned eyes on her and said:

"My dear colleague, how fortunate! But no headpiece? No headpiece, and two robots with inexplicable neuroses? Explain! Explain! But first enter your Immunity Suit—if that too is not depolarised—and we can talk about it over our contact-beams."

She glanced quickly around. Sheamus had already gone below the jump of the hill—the sky was pale and the land a blank. A bird of anxiety fluttered in her stomach.

She said: "I'm quite all right, thanks."

"Without a dome?"

"The occasional direct experience is useful to an anthropologist."

"But not, surely, the planet's untreated atmosphere?"

"It doesn't affect me in the least."

"I confess, you surprise me."

"I mean . . . it *does* affect me, but I like it."

"*That's* another matter, and just what I feared. With your—er—infirmity it was obvious that you would like it. We've job enough in the department to control the few Vivippies left to us—and *they* breathe nothing but Mars air! My dear young lady"—he spread gauntleted hands—"think of your intellectual usefulness and try to pull yourself together! For millions of years humanity has been the slave of sex. People wasted their whole lives in the grip of a motive that was intellectually footling—and physically nothing but a bit of bio-mechanics that could be done better by a chemist and a microscope."

"I'm afraid my mind isn't as lofty as yours."

"Nonsense, you've an excellent mind! Rated at ninety-two, isn't it? *Anyone* of your rating must see the perils of reaction."

"Well, I can't," Scandia said firmly.

"I don't believe you. A low-rated Vivippy, perhaps . . . but not *you*. You're a hundred per cent rational. And—er—it may interest you to know that your recent public-spirited protest about that fellow Orcus impressed me very much. So much that I'm going to become your mate myself. Ah, that pleases you"—as Scandia betrayed an inward spasm of mirth—"Now you'll understand how depressing I find this behaviour."

"Go on . . ." she spluttered.

"I'm going to give you a small lesson. I'll show you that a fully adult, high-rated and *dedicated* mind can take this atmosphere and be none the worse. I propose"—and he began calmly to unscrew his headpiece—"to show that a sense of responsibility can overcome the moral inebriation this air seems to give. I . . ."

"Don't do it!" Scandia cried, standing up.

"You can't stop me, it's for your own good. There!" He stood with the dome in his hand, his large and rather fishlike eyes regarding her magisterially. Fascinated, she watched his defiant chest as he braced it to the air, thumping a fist on it, breathing slowly, side-stepping a little with the strength of the inhalation.

"I . . ." he gulped air, "find no effect whatsoever, except a most inconvenient quickening of superficial impressions." He doubled over a cough. "My synapses must be working overtime. But mark this"—he raised his gloved finger—"however at this moment I examine my mind, I find no wavering from simple duty and common obligation. *Welfare* remains the only first."

"You . . . you needn't have done this for me," Scandia choked.

"I'm repaid if it demonstrates a truth," he answered, advancing a step towards her and gesticulating at the expressionless sky. "Mind

over matter ! Don't you think that's wonderful ? The key-phrase of our culture !" He dropped a paternal hand to her shoulder. " You see, if you'll only go back to using that pretty head of yours . . ."

He fell silent, wheezing a little as the air distended his lungs.

" Most extraordinary," he gasped at length. " One doesn't notice the landscape properly from those Immunities. Really beautiful . . . all this . . . in a primitive sort of way."

Scandia began to retreat.

" Of course," he explained, " it's well known that our remote ancestors just *frittered* their lives away admiring nature, but . . ."

He turned; he had lost sight of her. She was behind him, moving carefully to get the land to her back.

" You fit into it very well, my dear."

" Do I ?"

" Like a goddess." He pursed his lips with a faraway look, and then smacked them. " Rare antique word ! But . . . don't go away . . ."

She met his eyes for an instant and they stood there, yards apart, he rosy-eager, she petrified. Then, as he lurched forward, she tore like the wind towards the shore-rocks, the big figure of the Director of Moral Welfare in pursuit.

" Sheamus !"

It was a half-obliterated cry. He came out of the cabin and strode to the crest, and then began to run.

He caught Protonilus-130 round the middle as the Martian was peering from the shelter of a rock at the girl who stood at bay and was throwing stones. Protonilus squealed with alarm and they rolled fully into Scandia's view. She held a hand to her mouth, seeing the scrambling figures and the fists and feeling a pleasure as exquisite as any yet discovered.

Protonilus staggered from a blow, fell heavily and, being entirely without the simpler sort of ethics, pulled out his blaster and pressed the button.

His hand was unsteady; a rock disintegrated beside Sheamus and a strip of sand was fused into glass.

Sheamus felt the licking heat. He howled and flung himself on Protonilus.

Protonilus dropped the blaster. Again in his innocence of correct behaviour, he used his heavy-shod foot and landed a crushing kick upon Sheamus's naked shin. Sheamus yelled and lost his grip. Protonilus recovered the blaster and retreated to a safe distance. He sighted carefully at the oncoming Sheamus . . .

His legs were jerked into the air and he found himself sliding backwards over the sand on his stomach. Above him on the speech-mechanism of the Immunity he heard Scandia order Sheamus to pick up the blaster. The compulsion-beam lifted him eighteen inches and dropped him with a jar that sent the breath from his body. He saw the Immunity descend and Sheamus wriggle into the open hatch, and he staggered up—promptly to be knocked down again. Then the beam was withdrawn and he watched with hangdog disappointment the Immunity dwindle into the lake of air.

"Hurry," Scandia told Mike Doonan. "We haven't got the boat—somehow we'll have to squeeze into the Immunity. The Martians—"

"But I *need* the Martians—it didn't take you and Sheamus to remind me that two's company. Somewhere amongst the Martians I've a feeling there's a little woman . . . You see, I'm a marooned monogamist—the only thing I want is a little . . ."

"That's true," Sheamus urged. "It's a woman he needs, to fall in love with the skyful of stars in her eyes."

"The Martians," Scandia said, "wouldn't give him a woman, and they're *quite* unemotional about eyes and stars. They leave that side of life to the Directorate of Hatcheries. If he walked into Mars City they'd put him on a slab and analyse him and then write books about him."

"But when they'd done the books perhaps they'd find me a little . . ."

They all looked up as the sky screamed. A saucer was descending, a pearly pancake, flattening the trees. It came to rest not fifty yards away, the hatch opened and five robots got out in shining procession; then Dardanus-104 and then Orcus-78.

Dardanus said: "There they are!"

Orcus, from inside his earthsuit, stared and said: "Scandia-92 looks . . . peculiar. I've never seen a female with a face as pink as that. I can see her cheeks glowing from here."

"She's been breathing poison for days," Dardanus reminded him. He waved his blaster. "Come on . . ."

7.

When the saucer had settled on the ebonite Dardanus observed conversationally that the two Earthmen were unconscious.

Trembling, distraught, hemmed-in by robots and steel, Scandia sobbed: "They'll die!"

"That's all right," Dardanus assured her. "In any case, we haven't the equipment for keeping *live* Earthmen. As it happens, a post-mortem will be even more informative . . ."

When they stood by the beetles ready to drive into the city she saw the two limp figures—merchandise in the hands of the robots—and clung to Orcus as to an accomplice, remembering that what she had once glimpsed in him had been akin to her present passion, if only a fraction of it.

"Orcus . . ."

"I hear we're no longer engaged."

"Yes, that's true. But, Orcus, we've got to—"

"Now that we're not to be mated," he interrupted, "I can be as unconventional as I like. I—I find you attractive—as a mammal, you know."

She said: "I know. And if you can think of a way to save *them*, I . . . I'd be . . ."

A numbness came over her as the beetle, with the Earthmen inside, slid away from where they stood towards Erythraeum Prospect.

"Grateful, appreciative, or what?" he asked, harshly and with the eyes starting out of his head.

"I'd do anything . . ."

"For instance, would you drop your rating?"

"I expect I've lost that anyway."

"Then you'll be just an ordinary Vivippy, and . . ."

"Mind a machine, or cook bran, or learn to dance on Video—yes."

"I've an idea. But if it works you'll owe me something. Will you be my own regular Vivippy? You know . . . picnics in Earth-air, and all that?"

"Anything," she faltered. "But save them!"

"And if I do, you'll always be . . . around?"

"As long as you need me."

"Well then," he said. "What happens if a hole comes in the city dome?"

She stared. "Why, the act of breaking the dome sends an impulse to Control which operates the maintenance-robots."

"If you took a beetle out through the lock and turned and drove it hard against the dome, it would make the biggest hole ever seen."

"But the robots—"

"While you were doing that, I'd be at Control stopping the robots."

"Can they be stopped?"

"One could smash the City Engineer."

"Who is he?"

"Just a positronic brain."

"All right, smash him—quickly! I'll look after the rest."

Orcus thought of the neat rows of robots at Control and the complex neuroses his action would cause. He hesitated.

"I'd . . . I'd lose my rating as well."

He started as Scandia's lips approached his own. He felt a moist and electrifying sensation and a weakness in his legs.

She said: "You ought to try it in Earth-air."

She pushed him away. "Go—quickly!" Then she began to cry.

Dardanus-104 had called the department together. Scores of thin-chested men and neuter women had surrounded the interesting exhibits on the non-conducting slabs.

"It was most fortunate that we managed to capture this pair instead of the single wild man reported. Their condition," Dardanus added, "is ripe for the encephalograph."

The metal skull-caps of Sheamus and Michael Doonan were almost hidden by festoons of leads, the nerve-like tendrils of the electro-encephalograph. Dials ticked and whispered, lights glowed. When Dardanus threw a switch twin screens lit up and thin linear graphs flickered.

"Later," he announced, "we'll dissect the really interesting features—the glands. Meanwhile it's interesting to see that the subjects are still alive, as witness the cortical surface-activity. Intelligence, you will note, is distinctly possible; also a lively pair of pre-frontal lobes . . ." He broke off as Protonilus-130 strode in. "Ah, Director—back from your trip, I see."

Protonilus glared. "My own pre-frontal lobes," he cried, "are *seething*. I'm filled with alien gas. Thought I'd got rid of it. But . . . can't you hear your wrist-radio? There's a council meeting at Control . . ."

It was true—Dardanus himself was receiving the summons. But a queer thing was happening; he felt the air pluck at him and draw music from his fibres softly and cunningly, spreading in quickening fire to his feet and touching each cell into a sudden and stable completeness. His breast laboured; he felt inebriated, yet wonderfully aware of matter in all its aspects . . .

He gulped and looked around the hall. Everyone was affected except the neuter females. The male anthropologists were wheezing slowly, already beginning to stare baffled at the neuters. And the two captives were recovering. Sheamus was the first. He sat up, snapping several leads in the process, tore the skull-cap from his head—and found himself staring dizzily without recognition into the eyes of Protonilus-130.

In the circular and windowless room of the Welfare Council the agenda moved across the screen.

The positronic secretaries were cosy with green lights and clicking action. They dreamed as they chumbled over the news and made frequent announcements :

"A large hole exists in the city dome. The maintenance robots are not available. Repeat not . . ."

"Reported hole caused by mentally-deranged individual driving beetle against dome-base near West Airlock."

"Intense atmospheric pollution . . ."

"Individuals advised to breathe sparingly, preferably through gauze filters."

"Viviparous sections extremely unrestful. Male individuals are warned to keep away from Elysium Avenue district."

"Two wild natives loose in the city . . ."

"Certain panic-seizures by individuals reported of saucers and Immunity Suits. Fifty viviparous females, the Director of Moral Welfare and a junior field-anthropologist observed to have left the city. Individuals are asked to stay in city until hole can be repaired."

Winking greenly, they threw out the news with their synthetic voices.

The council room was empty: the sounds fell flatly into the softnesses of gaping chairs.

The computer-banks at Control chewed the problem—regurgitated—chewed again and vomited tapes of math. There was no way out. The positronic brain of the City Engineer was self-repairing—within limits. But those limits did not include an attack with a blaster. The city's safety now lay with whatever manual labour could be found . . . and the available few were already preoccupied with the thrilling breeze that now blew through the streets.

The effect at first was of clandestine, almost surreptitious riot. Men with high ratings and impeccable records—some with an elaborate air of unconcern—converged on Elysium Avenue. Gradually the climate grew more feverish . . .

Protonilus had been one of the first to succumb to the insidious Aphrophon. In his official capacity he had often thundered against the occasional lapse—the couple caught amorously gasping outside the dome. Now he was all on fire himself.

He found Orcus with a score of Vivippies, proposed a mass elopement and offered his private saucer. On the way to the airlock they picked up dozens more.

Scandia was sitting dazed in her beetle beside the wide hole she had made where the quartz of the dome met the ground.

Orcus said : "Remember your promise?"

She screamed.

"But not with all those women!"

"Bring her along," he ordered. He was flushed, triumphant. The shrill girls pulled Scandia out of the beetle.

Meanwhile, Sheamus wandered about the city, staring with uncomprehending anxiety at the splendour of chrome and plastic, the cube-like buildings, the ebonite ways and the traffic-robots at the intersections—at the frequent female, fleeing from a predatory male—at the revelry that had begun around the bars and video halls of Elysium Avenue.

Where was Scandia?

"My grief!" he cried, shaking his fist at the unseemly groups. "That a man should lose his own in Babylon itself, where a woman, if one has eyes, is no safer than a fly in a wasps' nest!" And he quickened his pace, searching agitatedly amongst the no less agitated Martians.

When the hole in the dome was at last repaired (manually and with neuter labour) the change in the atmosphere did not affect him at once. Luckily he was within two hundred yards of one of the airlocks when the sudden dizziness warned him. The robots were not interested in his semi-nakedness and other-worldly tan; to them he was a human with the essential silhouette, and they obligingly operated the lock.

He found himself in rich air within sight of an empty spaceport. In screening furze he flung himself to the ground, saw the city dome and tasted a salt bitterness.

But when, in the early light of the eighth day, weak from a diet of berries and such as he might get, he came into sight of MAN HERE and gazed along the road to spy the drunken signpost, he was astonished to see an Immunity near his cabin and, as he broke into a run, to smell cooking.

He stopped, amazement knocking at his brains, as a slim, pale woman came out of the cabin and stared with a fixity to equal his.

And then: "Sheamus, my boy—it's you!" Mike Doonan bore a spade; in spite of his beard he looked silky with prosperity. "Meet the little woman," he said. "She calls herself a Vivippy. I call her the Thin Woman of Inis Magrath. But it all adds up." The Martian female squealed as a broad slap caught her inadequate buttocks.

"But . . . my cabin . . ." Sheamus stammered.

"My dear lad, I made this cabin when you were *so* high. But don't grieve, you can easily build another. But keep off Clare"—he pointed at the large blue island in the bay—"a garden of hours—sink of promiscuity! There's all of fifty Vivippies on that island, and only two men. One of 'em used to be in charge of Moral Welfare! These

Martians aren't a bit respectable, once they get going. Stygian profligates, the lot. Except mine, of course—I've beaten some monogamy into her . . ."

"But . . . Scandia . . .?"

"She's one of them alright." He flung an arm. "With the wheeling stars in her eyes and the bright dust of galaxies shining in her hair. And the music of the spheres in her voice. And herself a testimonial to creation when she walks abroad . . . And over there she stays—just a pebble on King Solomon's beach . . ."

But Sheamus was already heading shorewards.

The boat still lay dry above the waterline.

He rowed doggedly over a sullen sea, sparing breath for imprecations at a sour and windless sky. The island sat athwart the horizon, its bulk looming as the sweat flowed from his armpits.

8.

Protonilus-130 and Orcus-78 crouched behind the barricaded door of one of the few sound cottages on Clare. Night had fallen, but through a crack Protonilus could see the dim and milling crowd of females outside and hear their incessant voices.

"I think they're making some sort of battering-ram," he groaned.

He looked and felt deflated. Beside him Orcus had shrunk to an agitated and grey-faced stick of manhood, all eyes and defensive hands.

"It's the end," he said hollowly. "Unless we can reach the saucer."

"That's the tantalising part—it's only fifty yards."

"Could we not make a dash? One of us might get through, at least."

"Have you considered," Protonilus asked, with a trace of his majestic manner, "the fate of the other?"

Orcus shuddered.

"I blame myself," Protonilus went on, "but as an anthropologist you might have warned me."

"Of what? No one could have foreseen . . ."

"However desirable in isolation, women are quite impossible *en masse*! Surely your studies must have told you . . ."

"I'm only a seventy-eight," Orcus sulked. He peered through the crack. A large Vivippy was outside, beckoning to unseen companions. There was a falsetto babbling and something large was being dragged. "I believe they've got a fallen tree," he faltered.

As the door shook to the first blow, Protonilus mounted a pile of timber and plaster in a corner and felt the broken edges of the ceiling-joists. "I'm wondering," he said, "if we could not reach the roof."

"Ravening wolverines!" Orcus breathed, as another crash followed. "And you thought they'd all *belong* to us, all fifty of them!"

"On the contrary, *you* thought . . ."

"Even as a seventy-eight," Orcus grieved, "I've got *some* knowledge of history. For instance there was once a country run by women called Amazons. They kept men in subjection, just as these propose doing."

"Well, why didn't you think of that before? Besides, it's your own ex-colleague—that unutterable Scandia—who's the ringleader. Quick! Let me stand on your shoulders . . ."

A moment later Protonilus was in the roof space and had drawn Orcus after him. They gained the roof by breaking through the unboarded slates and lay on the low pitch, listening to the clamour below.

"I think it's clear at the back," Protonilus said. "An easy drop and a straight worm to the saucer."

"You realise we'll lose our ratings if we go to Mars City?"

"As far as I'm concerned they can have mine for a yeast-pill." And Protonilus slithered silently to the ground.

The saucer lay on the cobbles of what was once a village square. Most of the Vivippies were in front of the cottage; a few had collected at the strong back door, whilst one or two were attacking the windows which had been barricaded with stones and timbers from within. The fugitive males dropped to their bellies and wriggled off into the nettles and rubbish of the back garden. From the broken wall the pale silver of the saucer could be seen. They went on stomachs and elbows towards the promise of freedom.

When, without warning, the saucer took off, Scandia knew what had happened before the howls of the Vivippies had died. With Machiavelian thoroughness she had the next phase already in mind.

"Girls!" she cried in ringing tones, as the baulked females crowded around her, "They've escaped!"

Some of the lowest-rated cheered; others yelled and shook their fists.

Scandia held up her arm and shouted through the din: "Remember what those vile creatures would have made us! Their house-robots, all of us! A few might have found favour and been kept for a while in idleness—until those monsters tired of them. For the rest—a lifetime of loveless toil at their contemptible beck and call!"

"Our counter-proposal was reasonable. I mean, the suggestion that *we* should rule the island and that they should be government property. Would they listen? No! They wanted to own all of us, bodies and souls!"

"But what shall we do now?" someone screamed. "After all, they *were* men!"

"What do you want?" Scandia thundered, pointing at the heckler. "A whole man for your own, or a fiftieth share in a man? There *are* others on this planet—a man for each of us—if only we'll go and look."

"Where?" several shouted, peering about as if frutuitous and eligible spouses were dropping from the trees.

"And I don't mean Martians, but the men of Earth. Do you know what the statistics say? That there's at least one native in every square thousand miles! Haven't we food and Immunities? Let's go and find men for ourselves! Let each one of you fly to find her destiny!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"As for me," Scandia finished, "I shall be quite content with *this* square thousand miles."

In the first light the capsules had looked like thistledown flung into a vortex of spirally wind as the determined women took the sky. Some of them drew definition from the mounting sun, and then it was like a cloud of bubbles expanding into the morning air. The trees of Clare stirred their stunted arms and the sea began to twinkle as the last bubble became a speck.

Some, thought Scandia, will undoubtedly find men. Martians, if not Earthmen. For it was certain that the city's biology had broken down. Soon—this year—next year—the robot computers would be designing ploughs to scratch the land outside the dome.

She was tired, but not at rest.

She sat on the fallen tree outside the still unbroken door of the cottage and watched the channel and the leaden heights of the mainland. Sometimes she glanced at the cottage, thinking about repairs, the stones in the soil, the mysteries of wild barley and untamed sheep.

Then, of course, there was Sheamus himself, with his ego uncrossed—a man all hard purpose, bright and solid . . .

She was still thinking when the boat came into view; but the sight sent her down to the ruined quay, laughing, waving, full of the joy of, surrender.

—Martin Jordan

Most readers will remember the first "Dimple" story by John Kippax in Science Fantasy No. 11. The one which follows is just as humorous and sets rather a precedent for a new author—how often should he produce stories couched in a similar vein? Judging by the favourable comments already received this series could well go on indefinitely.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

By JOHN KIPPAX

Illustrated by WOODWARD

It so happens that I am chinwagging one morning to my pal Satchmo, (which long dark angel is pvt Abraham Grant Washington in the records) in the receipts bay of Ordnance Corps depot, Mars Base, and Dimple is sitting watching us with the light of love in her optic. In case you do not remember Dimple is my lady dachshund what is now officially on the strength of the unit. She is listed as a vermin exterminator, which job she shares along with the dachshund belonging to our section officer, Lieutenant Tearhouse.

Pluto being a he and she being female they get on very well together: this is generally considered to be a very reasonable sort of arrangement. At least, I keep trying to sell the idea to Louisa, who manages the PX here: Louisa is blonde and brown-eyed and shapely. She is always nice to me, but as about four thousand other characters have elected her the girl they would most like to be in orbit with, the competition is fierce and that more than somewhat. Every feller who comes back from the six months earth leave we get once every three



years brings her a present, and it is my belief that she could buy the base now if she wanted to. I do not complain, mark you, that Louisa is a digger: what gets me griping is that she does not dig *me*.

She digs Dimple though: that pooch can go anywhere in the female quarters, and I mean *anywhere*. Satchmo says would it not be interesting to put a micro scanner on Dimple's collar and then look in on one of the signal corps receivers. I tell him that I am shocked, disgusted and revolted by his say so, and anyway, we do not know any signals guy sufficiently well to get it fixed.

You will note that I say this conversation takes place in the depot receipts bay, whereas yours truly normally goes through the motions in the packing bay. I am therefore chizzed for reasons multitudinous, like Master Sergeant Miller, to name just a few, for I am much in favour of this bum being as far away from me as possible, which he is when I am working in my rightful place. Miller is a great guy—necessary, like a hole in the head. His face is such that they will not let him handle certain technical stores, because one look at him and a scintillograph will register "full count—protective clothing needed." Satchmo says that the guy is two faced, but I say no this is not possible: if Miller was two faced he would not be wearing the one he has on now.

We have loads of work on in the depot, especially as today three freight ships have come in, a thing never before known, not even on our colonel's birthday. It is new stuff, we think, and Satch is as full of rumours about it as a dog is full of fleas, present company like Dimple excepted of course. She sits watching us with her broad head on one side, and you would swear she understood every word **we** said.

She looks cute, especially now that the women have promoted her sergeant.

So I am saying listen Satchmo I think you talk through your ear: those orderly room jerks tell you any tale they like, and you lap it up. Rumours are like dames—leave them alone and they soon show up for the so and so's they are. At this he shows all his teeth in an African laugh saying har har you can talk. It is sour grapes with you my lad, look how keen you are on Louisa: and what have these dames on Mars got that the gals at home haven't? And I say nothing bud, but they got it here.

So, he goes on, this here stuff what we are handling now is special—detectors—and more counters and so on, at which I reply don't give me that: we should need more counters! We got no geigers left to count, not even in the stoo. Then he says it is true that they are figuring to send a special set of detector units out into space to check on the bug men scares. At which I laugh like I am going to split my government issue and that takes a strong man, and I say bug men do you mean Miller owns up to fatherhood? And Satchmo says no but I am meeting an engineers corporal from test area B and he says they have some midget reactor motors there so secret they never came through this here depot, and they are the power units for these detectors.

Now this is interesting, and I stand and ponder, at which my friend pvt Funk says in passing now you take it easy Herman boy we will do the unloading you only been there gabbing about ten minutes. At which I remind him that I am the senior soldier present, Miller being away to the orderly room. Well Satchmo I say, if he is from test area B the corp should know, but hell, you know what a line some of them can shoot. Still, there could be bug men I guess: look at the old flying saucer scares of the fifties and sixties, and what happened there. Next rumour?

They tell me, says Satchmo impressively, that we are going to have an inspection. At which I say do not be such a git Washington, we have an inspection every five minutes of our naturals: for one thing and another. I was free from infection last time and I have had no opportunity to be otherwise since: I suggest that you remuster to a piece of string, and then get thoroughly knotted.

Satch does not blush with anger because this is not within his colour range, but he draws himself up like a gibbon that does not know where its next branch is coming from. Oh very well he says all haughty, in future I will save my info for where it is appreciated. You do that I tell him, and one day you will be a general like me. And here Satchmo turns and tries to walk off with dignity, but this does not come off because he cannons right into pvt Funk who is staggering along with

a large case. The case goes flying and Funk sits down and they start exchanging intimate opinions of one another. Then I shout hey look there is a box out of this case. (They have opened up the top of this one to get the consignment vouchers out). I pick up a box and something inside rattles. I see that it is labelled "Infinity recorder Mk III. Sub assembly 7. Cat. No. 553/2." So I open this, and I see that the bash it got did no good to it at all. Two dial faces are smashed off, and I can see at once that this is one of the super jobs where they have all the bearings of jewels, and any tech who was handy with a set of BT files and platinum wire could . . .

I am aware that about six sad sacks, including Funk and Satchmo, are breathing down my neck.

Oh, pvt Funk, I say, if you will make out a deficiency chit for this I will sign it.

Why do I not keep my big mouth shut ?

For at this point the voice what breathed o'er Phobos says har Herman, since when have pfc's been able to sign deficiency chits, such power of authorisation being the preserve of full sergeants and above ? Why you clever little man says Master Sergeant Miller, you can consider yourself on a charge of attempted illegal disposal of government property. Get to work you bums he roars, and the soldiery melt like the little old ice cap. You will be on a fizzer in front of Lieutenant Tearhouse tomorrow a em he says, and see that you do not go into the PX for any reason, such places being off limits for those on a charge or would you like to make it a CO's offence ?

Ohnosarge I say.

You would not like to say anything about this counter now ? He asks.

Ohnosarge I say, but I would like to tell you what you can do with it.

His ears shade slightly to red and he barks very abrupt and wassat ?

Sign it in to repair section I tell him, and my face is that straight you could rule lines with it.

Next morning we are on section parade, and the sergeant major and Master Sergeant Miller are there too, with Lt. Tearhouse as star of the proceedings. I stand there wondering what form the charge will take, and I reflect that maybe he will not be too tough as my dog is his dog's girl friend and he is not really a bad guy at all. Anyway, I have taken other precautions.

So after the routine inspection, the lieutenant addresses us.

Now attention, attention men he says, this is important.

This is his usual start and we do not strain our ears for it, but when he gives out with a couple of famous names we are all ears, which fact, in the case of Miller, is very obvious.

The experimental work being done on Mars is to be greatly increased he says, and there will be more men coming out from earth to make up all sections, including ours. Generals Samson and Cole are coming to look at the supply position from Ordnance Corps angle, and on what they see will depend many things, such as a separate new blister for a much bigger depot, as well as promotion for the right men and so on and so on, and our efficiency is not questioned of course but we must put up a good show and so on . . .

Then parade is over and it is cap off you and I am wheeled sharpish in front of the loot, and Miller gloats as the sergeant major reads out the charge which says (1) did usurp the authority of a senior NCO in that he did announce his intention of consigning a damaged store, to wit a detector sub-assembly, having (2) previously been responsible for the damage by neglect of the said sub-assembly.

Which gear straight from the cattle truck is typical of Master Sergeant Miller.

So the lieutenant he says serious very serious pfc Herman J. Herman and what have you got to say for yourself?

So I draw myself up and say sir the charge is most misrepresentative sir permission to call the first witness sir. And the sergeant major looks on his bit of paper and he calls dee oblique seven seven three oh oh two private Washington A G and Satch comes in and throws the officer up a real beauty.

Then my pal opens his face wide and the room seems to light up and he says suh ah was a witness of the accident where the detector piece was damaged and it was not the fault of pfc Herman suh. This Funk was carrying the case and he put it down and said he felt dizzy, and then he picked it up and carried it further, but he collapsed near pfc Herman who dived to save him suh and so the top of the case got stove in when it fell.

Ah says the lieutenant, but what about the signing part of the business? Oh sir, I said, Funk was so upset about the damage that I had to say something like that to comfort him.

And the lieutenant asks is this Funk a dizzy type and Satchmo yips ain't we all and they wheel him out of the office.

Then Miller gives me a look which should have stuck four inches out of my back and says sir shall we check on pvt Funk he was not on parade this morning. So the officer grabs the fone and gabs and the light of reason dawns and he says oh and ah. Then he puts back the receiver, looks hard at me and says case dismissed.

Which makes Miller gobble like a turkey.

So I leave without a stain on my character. That is, it will stay unstained until Funk gets out of dock. When he tells me that he will back up my charge story by going sick this morning he does not know that I intend the M.O. shall be certain of his dizziness: I have arranged with two large medics who are buddies of mine to put him on the test centrifuge for fifteen minutes. When they finish with him I figure that he will not be able to tell port from starboard for quite some little time.

Which shows the value of having real friends who will stick by you.

When I arrive in the depot this morning I do not go into the receipts bay. I go into packing at the other end, where I look in on Dimple to see that she is OK. She is feeling fine and dandy and I unchain her and we go to work. I say *we* because Dimple does a few chores in the packing bay like sorting out labels and vouchers and so on. Did I not say she was a smart hound?

As there are not many issues to do this morning we fall to gabbing about the inspection and the fellers are of the opinion that we are all fireproof and what can a couple of generals do to you? And I say we will blind them with polish. This reminds me of the time when we commandeered that farmer's fields in training back on earth—he had to take his bull out so that we could get ours in.

Someone produces an earth blat and says see, this should keep us cheerful, and he points out a story where some guys in an orbit station off Venus saw a nightmare ship with little men in plastic suits operating it, and the headlines scream *Bug Men Seen!!!! Space Station Men Go Crazy!!!!* At which pvt Menotti says aw nuts, they was crazy already: all station men are. And then they start to gab about test area B again, so I come in with break it up you guys we got some buffing to do: if any inspecting general opens up that cleaning materials cupboard and finds we got a visitape machine with all Marilyn Mars' shows spooled up too, they will make us walk back to earth for a five year sentence, so get moving.

And they moved accordingly.

Then I see Dimple running out to meet someone and it is Satchmo. He waves some paper at me and says sign here Herman.

I am surprised and ask you got a load for here? This is the packing bay. He says you can't read now? This load is for the packing bay, and the vouchers with. So we go out and take a glaum at Satchmo's truck and sure enough three huge cases are for us.

So we sign and start to unload, and Satchmo being of an enquiring disposition gives a hand. Ramirez finds a large envelope which solves

the mystery even before we open a case. It says on it 'Morgan Autopacker. (Park Avenue Mfg. Co.) Instructions for assembly and operation.'

Well, well, says Menotti, we in this department have been sweating for one of these for eighteen months: it takes a flaming general or two to get things moving huh? This is part of the eye blinding he says, with the colonel thinking of being brigadier and little Tearhouse sweating on a shoulder full of brass, the squirt.

But I am happy: I did a course on the Morgan Autopacker before I left earth, and believe me it is a swell job. It takes standard size collections of stores, cuts and makes its own plastiboard cases, does its own binding, with a kidstuff servo job to watch the labelling. Oh, it is real classy, and we set to work to assemble it. I am very happy when I think of how well I shall demonstrate this thing, and how impressed the generals will be, and how I might even get my two stripes back. And we beat the record for installation. Satchmo says my my if only you could put Miller in one end it would save us a lot of trouble eh Herman and I say you are damrite boy and then I am aware that we are being watched. I can feel a pair of eyes boring into the small of my back.

Then Master Sergeant Miller pikes up and roars get the hell out of here private Washington I shall report you to your section for I think that the Service Corps do not like mikers any more than we do.

And Satchmo leaves like black lightning.

Then Miller walks up and down and he says ho and har and I am surprised that you got it working. Good he says very good pfc Herman you saved me a lot of trouble, you are a skilled fellow.

And I say beg your pardon sarge but I do not follow: naturally I got it working because my rightful place is in the packing bay, and of course I shall be operating this machine when the generals come round.

And he hoots wot in that vulgar way of his and I repeat the remark. He hoots again and states thats what you think and he waves a sheaf of orders at me, saying read these you lugs.

And we read.

The most important thing is the drill for doing a demonstration issue of stores so that the generals can see just how the depot operates. They will start at the indent office where an interesting order from a mythical unit will be waiting. When the stores issue-vouchers are prepared the generals can follow the issue's progress right through the depot to the packing bay, until it ends up on the despatch ramp, complete with receipts and what have you.

And then in the orders there comes a heading :

GENERAL'S INSPECTION: CHANGE OF DUTIES.

For the purposes of the demonstration issue, the following changes of duties will be made:—

1. *M/S Miller 347 to be i/c packing bay.*
2. *Pvt. Funk 043 to be General's orderly.*
3. *Pfc. Herman 111 to be on special fatigue duty.*

Then Miller who can see how I am feeling says you are a smart boy Herman but not smart enough. My need of warrant rank is greater than your need of two stripes. Your job will be to open doors for the party as it proceeds through the depot, and to make sure that there is nothing wrong in the department they are about to enter. Also, he says, you will see that all livestock is out of the way got that? We nod, and Dimple, who is smarter than any sergeant, shows her teeth and growls and Miller decides that he might as well go.

Well, says a voice, there is only one thing they cannot do to you in the army and I wouldn't even bet on that.

It is my friend Funk.

Hi there Diz, I say, all friendly.

Herman he says, if you gotta minute, there is a certain thing I have to discuss with you.

But then chow blows, and we do not discuss anything.

Funk is quite a big guy.

On the day of the inspection, with everything done up like a dog's dinner, there is an electric feel about the place which is not entirely due to the presence of the generals who arrived last night. There was a big bang over in the hills, somewhere in the test areas, and the guy who was on picket at two a m this morning says that there were four blood wagons came through the airlock, and that is why M.O's parade is being held at the PX recreation room this morning instead of at the sick bay. There are now some silly gits going about making the bug men sign, in which you hold your hand flat and sweep it out from the elbow at chest height, the movement meaning "they're only that high." I do not consider that the joke is in the best of taste.

At morning parade we are blinded by spit and shine and guys wearing their Moon and Venus medals and trouser creases you could cut your hand on: then after the two generals (one brown and one white) have taken a giz at us and recovered from it, they go into the depot to see the way the Corps does things.

And the first clanger drops.

The clerk gives the indent and the stores vouchers to Tearhouse, so that he can say his piece about them to the generals. And when the loot really sees these his eyes stand out like firing buttons.

And he yaps at the clerk whatinell are these ?

And the clerk says sir that is the paper work prepared to your order all ready for the demonstration issue of stores to a mythical unit.

And Tearhouse says I'll say it's mythical.

It reads—

From

O.C. No. 5 Stellar Recce Unit,

The Bug Men,

Alpha Centauri.

Outer Space.

(Via Triton Railhead).

The thing is over stamped *unit's transport to collect*, (which makes proper nonsense of it) and the whole demand is for a complete issue of a long range detector kit !

And while Tearhouse is fuming about this piece of substitution the colonel pops up with come come lieutenant may the issue proceed ? And Tearhouse comes to and says yessirohyes it may. And he hands over the vouchers to the gang of selector storemen and says check for availability and gordelpusall if it's not.

Well of course the stuff is available all right, but the issue takes a long time at all its stages, because it is no simple affair and the storehouse bods have not got to know the items thoroughly yet. However the two generals pad along with it, watching it grow as it makes its way through the various sections, and asking the ropey kind of questions that generals *do* ask. Me, I hop along in front, opening doors and spying out the route in advance, while the generals tool along with a train of fairly big, medium and small brass behind them, followed at a greater distance by spare NCOs and suchlike trash. By the time they near the packing bay the conveyor line has got some very valuable stores on it, but I should not be surprised if the generals are losing interest, especially as gin time is approaching.

And then suddenly a thought hits me ohblimeyoreilly ! *Did I lock up Dimple ?* And I go all hot and cold. I can remember us hiding the buckshee visitape, and the pinup collection, but I do not know what we did with Dimple ! I go panicking into the packing bay so fast that the guys standing there alerted nearly salute me from fright. I skid round to her little corner.

And she is not there !

So I come out and I whisper hey you lugs where is Dimple we do not want any generals taking a fancy to her where is she ?

No one has seen her. Ramirez says I will go outside and see if she is there and I will hide her but Miller shouts you get to your post they will be here in a minute ! ! ! He has his jaw set and the light of promotion is in his eye. This is when NCOs are very dangerous, and should be avoided at all costs.



So I leave him with his finger on the starting button of the autopacker and I shoot back just in time to bow the generals into the packing bay.

Tearhouse is spicling away like an anxious hen.

You will see that these stores being conveyed into the packing bay have already been put into one of three standard sizes of piles, he goes on. When they are on the packing machine platform the storeman removes the receipt vouchers which will be kept outside the cases and then the packing machine takes over.

He nods to Miller.

The big moment has come.

Miller presses the button.

Oh believe me, I could split my combs.

The autopacker does not start. Something whirrs, the machine gives a little coughing grunt, like a parrot when it laid the square egg, and that is that. Miller looks bewildered and he goes red, the lieutenant looks stern, the colonel looks at his watch and the two generals fidget.

Then the colonel says a piece in a voice like glass chips going through a mincer. Master Sergeant Miller, he grates, I was given to understand that this machine was put in order by you: didn't you do the assembly?

And Miller gasps and says well sir no sir it was like this sir—at which Tearhouse cuts in and says very sharply then let's see the stuff packed by hand then!

So I step forward and so does Ramirez and Funk and another guy. We all know the job well, and we do it real smart. But before we are through the generals say thank you it was a good show, and they obviously think that this is the end of the proceedings.

Which it is, really.

The colonel flutters round them and says well now we have a little surprise arranged in the mess come along Tearhouse and the captains and the kings, and their stooges depart. But before he goes I hear Tearhouse snarl at Miller I shall want an explanation of this and it had better be good!

Then midday blows, and we all skive off. I am just going into our hut to collect my eating irons when along comes Miller at a fair bat and he says heh, what happened to the stores what we issued for the demonstration?

And I say come come sarge naturally they finished up at the right place: they was put on the despatch ramp, with the receipt vouchers and everything. Why so excited?

I am not so excited he says, but as senior depot NCO I am really responsible, though not, he adds, giving me the cold and basilisk, not responsible for autopackers that go on the blink at the wrong moment. You are the only man in this depot who could have fixed it, so I shall speak to you about it later Mister Herman. In the meantime, you scam back to the packing bay and get those stores under lock and key: *security*!!!

So I do as I am told. The packing bay is quite deserted, but in the dim light I can see the stores on the ramp at the other end, while between me and them is the autopacker that didn't. Ha, ha. And then I remember something more important. Dimple.

So I give a little whistle.

There is a short bark in reply, but I do not see her.

I whistle again.

And Dimple walks out of the stores entry of the autopacker ! She sees me and she jumps down and as I go to head her off I could roar with laughter at the way in which she paid out Miller. And then it occurs to me that she might be hurt, so I call her Dimple here here good girl.

But no female sergeant ever takes any notice of me, and she chooses this moment to be playful. She dodges and I run, and when I am near the wall she does a quick turn and I try to do the same. I fall, and I catch my head a powerful crack against a heating unit: it is a real fourpenny one, and I feel sick and dizzy and not even half in this world. I lie there, and there is a slight clearing of the haze, and I see some papers pushed down by the side of the heating unit. I pull them out. My head reels. I make an attempt to read them, and my head feels as though it will sign its own repair chit any minute.

These vouchers read—

DEMONSTRATION ISSUE ONLY.

*O.C. 124 Detachment 25th Engineers,
Route Point 12,
Test Area B.*

The whole depot is whirring round. I could spit a brick. What ? How ?

Dimple comes and licks my face to show that she is sorry master fell down. I fend her off. *These*, these are the proper papers for the demonstration issue !

I feel lousy. It seems very dark in the bay. Over at the ramp there are guys from some unit collecting stores.

Short guys.

Little guys.

VERY LITTLE GUYS !

I try to call out, but no words come. Small dark men, they take the last case. They have gone. I find my voice, and I holler, louder: I stagger over to the ramp, and I grab at some paper lying there.

Then, it seems, I pass out.

When I wake, I am in the sick bay, with a piece of nice bending over me. But the hell of it is, she is a lieutenant. She has a beautiful soft voice, and she strokes my head, and I feel a lot better until she says your officer and a master sergeant will be in to see you in a few minutes Herman.

Okay then, they can question me, and they can have the truth. Yes the truth, right down to a set of receipt vouchers signed for in a tazy backhand script. Why should I worry? They cannot make me responsible for stores that go astray, or packing machines that won't work, or bad voucher preparation. I take another look at this smashing lieutenant and I think Jack, they can do what they like, I am all right. That is my story and I am sticking to it.

—John Kippax



W

Science fiction authors are reputed to be knowledgeable people, especially about life on board a spaceship. The first trip taken by one of them should prove to be very illuminating—especially if the crew of the ship play their parts well.

RELUCTANT HERO

By GAVIN NEAL

Illustrated by WOODWARD

David Preston was a most inoffensive man. From the bald patch on top of his head, over which the hair was so carefully brushed, to the shining leather of his black shoes, he radiated a shy good nature. The brown suit and inconspicuous tie emphasised his unobtrusiveness and his open chubby face with the short-sighted eyes showed a friendly and trusting disposition. There was nothing in his appearance to suggest that he could bring out the worst in members of the Space Service.

But his crime lay in his job, for he was one of the best paid science fiction writers in the world. He knew little about science and not much more about space travel but he had a lively imagination and his work had caught the public's fancy. The works he wrote under the name of Castro Veblen, a name of which he was still a little embarrassed, appeared in every medium of entertainment. His principal hero, Rocket Brydon, fought and loved his way through impossible situations on radio, television and strip cartoons. Books with garish covers announced to the public from every bookstall that Rocket Brydon had fallen foul of bug-eyed monsters on yet another planet. And the film

companies had started to cash in on this fantastic popularity. Preston was still naively astonished at his immense success and he was as shy and unobtrusive as ever.

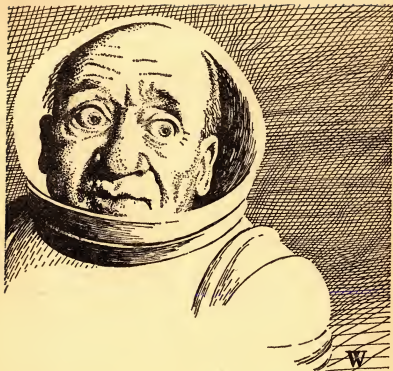
These imaginings of Preston, which so enthralled the general public, merely annoyed the less broad-minded members of the Space Service. The technical details of the Veblen stories made them tear their hair out in large handfuls. The descriptions of life on the planets made them groan in horror. And, when their friends or relations teased them about the BEMs that they, like Brydon, must have met on their travels, they cursed the unsuspecting author in no uncertain terms.

The crew of the *Lucian* could hardly believe their good fortune therefore, when they found that they would have the privilege of conveying Preston on a journey to the Moon. The Italian film company, for whom he was writing a Rocket Brydon script, were sending him over partly to let him absorb the local colour and partly as a publicity stunt. Preston had agreed with pleasure and had looked forward with anticipation to the trip when he would be able to experience at last the things he had written about so many times. The personnel of the *Lucian* had also looked forward to the trip with anticipation but for an entirely different reason.

The leader of the "Punish Preston" movement was Bill Jervis, the radio operator. It was rumoured that his mother had been frightened by a newspaper-inspired flying saucer scare before he was born and he certainly had an anti-science-fiction phobia. The merest mention of Rocket Brydon made him foam at the mouth. He was therefore determined to use this heaven-sent opportunity to rag Preston unmercifully and the rest of the crew, young men of high spirits who found the long days of free fall boring, were quite prepared to join in. The skipper, though officially dissociating himself from the proceedings, was prepared to turn a blind eye to what went on and was hoping that first hand accounts would be passed on.

The *Lucian* was principally a transport. Space travel was still in its infancy and the price of a trip to the moon discouraged pleasure cruises. In any case, the lunar base had neither the time nor the facilities to accommodate trippers. But all ships had limited accommodation for the personnel who had to make the journeys to the planets and back in the course of their work. Preston had managed to secure one of the small cubicles which masqueraded as cabins and which was not being used on this trip.

The crew were somewhat taken aback when the author went on board. They had expected someone with more self assurance. In their minds they had pictured Preston as someone rather more like Brydon, pushing, forceful, arrogant and overbearing. Had they not



planned their persecution for weeks ahead and savoured it in anticipation, they would probably have dropped it altogether when they found that Preston was shy and eager to learn. But no-one was prepared to be the first to back out of the scheme and so it carried on as arranged.

The time from take-off to "lights out" (the conventions of Earth were adhered to for simplicity in working) was taken up fully with the usual procedure of getting the ship onto its correct course. Preston was therefore left strictly alone and he pottered about happily until it was time for him to strap himself to his bunk and attempt sleep. And then the crew struck for the first time. When he awoke up in

pitch darkness, Preston found himself floating in mid-air. He kicked and struggled helplessly with no idea whether he was getting any nearer a wall or how he should systematically set about trying to reach one. In the end he was forced to shout for help and they left him there for a long time before they 'heard' him and went to his rescue. By then, he was in a panic and scarlet from exertion. They sympathised with him but expressed surprise that an expert like he was, should have known no better than to go to sleep without strapping himself down. In vain did he protest that he thought he had done so. They pointed out that the straps could never have come undone and, when they left him, Preston was convinced that the accident had been as a result of his own negligence. He was too good natured to suspect the truth.

When he arrived at breakfast the next day, Preston found that a beaker with coffee nestling normally inside had been already set at his place. Unthinkingly, he raised it to his lips and received the contents full in the face, as the momentum of the liquid, without the counterbalance of gravity, carried it onwards when the movement of the beaker was halted. Once again the crew were quick with sympathy but careful to point out that they were surprised that an authority on the subject should have neglected to use the clip-on top with attached drinking pipe that lay to hand on the table. Preston was acutely embarrassed and hastened through the meal under the reproachful glances of the spacemen.

It was a few hours before the writer ventured out from the safety of his cabin. The crew greeted him enthusiastically and took him on a tour of inspection of the ship, during which time nothing out of the ordinary happened and Preston gradually regained some of his confidence. He was getting used to floating around and propelling himself from handhold to handhold and was beginning to enjoy himself. But the crew had no intention of allowing this to continue. Jervis donned a pair of magnetic boots and proceeded to demonstrate to the delighted author the art of walking up the wall and along the ceiling. He finished his demonstration by leaping at the opposite wall and sticking there by his feet with his body stretched horizontally from it.

Preston was invited to leap over and join him. He at first diffidently declined but was pressed to do it and eventually, for fear of appearing standoffish, put on the boots that were offered. As he jumped, he realised that something was wrong for his boots had come away from the metal floor without effort, but it was too late to do anything about it. He landed with his feet against the wall, muscles tensed to take the shock, and immediately bounced off again and sailed off across the cabin, striking his head on the roof. Dazed and in a panic, he

threshed around, cannoning off the walls, floor and ceiling, sometimes turning head over heels, at other times gliding along in contorted positions. When he appeared to be coming to a stop, the crew pulled him down and began to apologise profusely. They couldn't imagine how a pair of unmagnetised boots could possibly have got into the store-rack: at the same time, they pointed out, they would have thought that he would have used his knowledge of gravity-free conditions to bring him to safety when he realised he was in trouble. Why hadn't he . . . ? Preston fled to nurse his aching body, his unsuspecting mind still without the slightest idea that he was the victim of an organised persecution.

It was twenty-four hours before the luckless victim felt well enough in body or spirit to venture out once more. He avoided the crew members as far as possible, feeling keenly his apparent failure to adapt himself to space conditions and imagining that the others must be looking down on him in consequence. He was disconsolately gazing out of an observation port in one of the cabins when there was a loud report behind him followed by a hiss of escaping air. Preston had been informed, as normal routine, of the emergency drill in case of a sudden leak in the hull, and his horrified mind now groped madly for the details. Get out quick, close the airtight door and sound the alarm. Was that it? He took a deep breath of precious air and launched himself at the door. But he had not yet completely acquired his space legs, and panic and the experiences of the last forty-eight hours undermined his judgment. He missed the door and crashed into the wall knocking most of the much-needed air out of his lungs. He clawed desperately for a handhold, missed and bounced off, reaching frantically for something solid to act as a launching base. By the time he got to the door handle he was purple in the face and almost hysterical. And the door wouldn't open! He tugged and heaved and even beat on the metal in a frenzy but it was no use. He was trapped, horribly and hopelessly.

And then the rational part of his mind asserted itself. The hissing had stopped. Either the hole was plugged up or all the air was gone. But if he were under conditions of zero pressure, his body would have ruptured long ago. He took a tentative breath and found that air was still present. And then even Preston's unsuspecting mind found the combination of a self-sealing leak and a jammed door too much to swallow. This was probably a standard trick played on all first-time travellers. And his other mishaps, were they perhaps also practical jokes? But he dismissed that suggestion. He felt that to entertain such a suspicion was highly uncharitable.

Jervis was put out on entering the cabin, to find that Preston was calmly examining the mechanism that had caused the fake leak and was not, as he had imagined when the beating on the door stopped, floating about the room in a faint. He admitted to the writer that the episode had merely been a rather rough spaceman's joke and appeared to be pleased that Preston took it in good part. In reality, he was annoyed that Preston had come so well out of it and this spurred him on to try something more spectacular which would even out the score and really reduce the author to complete panic. Since he knew that the more level-headed members of the crew would disapprove of the scheme he enlisted the aid only of Briggs, an engineer, who was always prepared to try anything once.

As if to make up for the trick he had played, Jervis offered to take Preston outside in a space suit, and the author agreed, partly to show there was no ill-feeling and partly because, although a trifle scared, he had hoped to experience the sensation of floating in the void while on the trip.

Jervis fetched Briggs and the three of them, suitably encased, passed out through the air lock. They were joined together by nylon rope and to Briggs' belt was attached a safety line, the other end of which was anchored to the lock. They circumnavigated the ship, studied the myriads of stars that studded the blackness around and tried a few simple manoeuvres. The author was delighted. He had got over his initial fears and was enjoying himself thoroughly when Jervis suggested over the suit radio that he should jump off as far into space as the rope would let him, he agreed enthusiastically and pushed off from the side. The sensation of floating along apparently completely isolated from all humanity was wonderfully soothing. He felt at peace with the universe.

The silence was suddenly shattered by a loud cry from Jervis. The rope had become mysteriously detached from Preston's belt and he was slowly gliding away from the ship into an infinity of emptiness. Jervis urged him to try and turn round and come back. This, of course, was impossible, but in the state of mind produced by the realisation of his plight, Preston was unable to think straight. He jerked his body about and made frantic swimming motions. His movements were hampered by the clumsy suit and he sweated and ached from the unusual exertion. As his distance from the ship inexorably increased, his mind grew suddenly calm and he stopped the useless movements. He thought quietly about his situation and then said unhurriedly over the radio :

"There's nothing I can possibly do from this end. And I don't suppose you can manage anything from yours. I guess this is it." Then he smiled ruefully and added, "What a tame way for Rocket Brydon to finish up !"

Briggs and Jervis, in spite of themselves, were impressed by the way the writer was taking it. But Jervis had no time to consider the matter deeply. He had to get Preston back before it was too late. Having unhooked the rope in the first place he was prepared to perform a rescue when the fun was over and the time had obviously now arrived. He had brought out with him a small hand rocket set and he now set off, skilfully steering himself until he was alongside the drifting author. It was a tricky manoeuvre but one that could be accomplished if one kept one's head, and Jervis did it coolly and scientifically. Then Briggs hauled the two men back on the line which Jervis had provided for the occasion and the three re-entered the ship. Once inside Preston collapsed and had to be stripped out of his apace suit and put to bed.

It took Preston a day to recover from his ordeal and, far from realising the true facts of the case, he was full of admiration and gratitude for Jervis's rescue when he once more came out from his cabin to resume shipboard routine. This state of mind was rudely shattered when he was called to the control room to have an interview with the captain.

The captain was actuated by the best of motives. He was doing what he could to make amends and was not to know that he was adopting the wrong course. He had been kept informed unofficially of the progress of the ragging and had enjoyed it as much as anybody. But when the news of Jervis's last exploit filtered through, he saw that things had gone too far. The two culprits were had up on the carpet at once and the crew was informed that, after such a dangerous episode, things were getting out of hand, and all ragging of the writer must cease forthwith. He finished by calling for Preston, explaining the situation, and apologising on behalf of the company. He knew, of course, that Preston had seen through the fake leak and imagined that he would also have realised that everything else, including the happenings outside came into the same category. He had reckoned without the writer's innocence.

Preston was horrified to find that the crew regarded him with such hatred. He was hurt and bewildered and withdrew into his shell. For the rest of the voyage he remained in his cabin, only emerging for meals and studiously avoiding the crew members. Had he remained unaware of the campaign against him, his good nature and shyness combined with the way he had stood up to the ragging would probably have won over the crew when they no longer regarded him as a butt for their humour and they would have parted on good terms. As it was, Preston retired defensively into his shell and the crew regarded this as evidence that he was sulking and taking the whole thing badly.

The voyage therefore ended with their relationship as bad as it had been at the beginning.

As he passed from the ship to a pressurised car on the Moon, Preston heaved a sigh of relief that the nerve-racking journey was over. On the surface of the satellite, he could avoid the members of the *Lucian* with ease and he did not anticipate that the people of the lunar colony would have the time, or the inclination, to continue the persecution. Any light-hearted legpulling about his work he could take good naturedly. He had not reckoned with the fact that the crew of the space ship, irritated by his apparent bad temper on the second half of the trip, would have a last fling before they made the return journey.

On the second day of his stay on the Moon, Preston was informed that the governor of the colony could spare a few minutes of his valuable time to see him that morning. The writer was still unfamiliar with the arrangement of the underground colony and was led through a maze of tunnels to the room that was supposed to house the governor. The person he met was in fact one of the engineers suitably dressed and disguised and carefully primed by the crew of the *Lucian*. He greeted Preston affably, commented agreeably on the work of Castro Veblen, welcomed him to the colony, gave him a brief account of its origin and workings and turned him over to a supposed subordinate who was to show him around. The guide did in fact take him on a brief tour of the city and finished up by offering him a place in a pressurised car that was about to go out on a tour of the surrounding surface. Preston readily agreed, and they set off with two others on the proposed trip.

To the inexperienced Preston, the journey seemed to take them miles away from the colony. In actual fact, as the car wound its circuitous way round craters and other obstacles, the driver unobtrusively kept turning back on his tracks and circling round the lunar base. When they finally stopped, they were only a few hundred yards away from it, the surface installations being hidden by a high ridge of rock. The guide had kept up a running commentary for the author's benefit during the trip and, when the car stopped, he invited Preston to don a space suit and accompany him on a tour of the surrounding country. This was promptly accepted and they proceeded through the air lock and surveyed the surface.

Preston was engrossed in the study of a meteor crater when out of the corner of his eye he saw the car head away from the ridge and disappear behind a fold in the ground. Surprised, he looked round to see where his guide had got to, in order to find out why they had been deserted so suddenly. But a thrill of fear shot through him as he saw that the plain was completely deserted. No living thing stirred in all

the vast emptiness. The only thing that kept him company was a large placard which had been set up against a rock and whose message read :

“ Will Rocket Brydon Reach Safety ?

Don't Miss The Next Thrilling Instalment ! ”

Even although panic was gripping at his heart, the sight of the words fired Preston with the determination to keep his head and find his way back without affording his tormentors the satisfaction of seeing him give way to terror. After his experience with Jervis outside the space ship, he was quite ready to believe that the crew of the *Lucian* had had him stranded miles away from the lunar colony. In the fierce heat of the sun and with only limited supplies of oxygen he could not last long. He had no doubt that help would be at hand when he had come to the end of his own resources but in matters of that kind a slight hitch anywhere could prove fatal. In space, they had risked his life in a practical joke; they would obviously be willing to do so again. In his attempt to return to the underground quarters, he must not wander about looking for the correct route. He must strike out in the right direction from the start. He settled down in the shade and began formulating a plan of campaign.

To imagine what Rocket Brydon would have done in the circumstances was singularly unhelpful. He would have had a hunch about the correct direction in which to head and in any case some fortunate coincidence would have been bound to occur to get him out of any difficulties that would have arisen. Brydon's creator could hope for no such luck. He had to use pure reason. And pure reason didn't seem much help. The car had left no tracks on the hard surface. He must deduce the correct route with no information from which to work. He could hardly believe that the spot in which he had been left would be such that he would be able to see base if he climbed one of the rocky hillocks nearby. In any case he was not keen on climbing these vertical slopes in a space suit with the chance that a fall might cause his suit to be punctured and result in an untimely end of his career. An idea began to form in his mind: a climb, a fall, and his rigid space suit punctured. It was worth trying.

Some of the crew of the *Lucian* were carefully concealed in shadowy crevices along the ridge prepared to be entertained by the author's discomfiture and frantic efforts to find the way to safety. They had no intention of letting him come to any harm and had the car standing by out of sight ready to be signalled in to the rescue when help was required. They watched Preston come out from the protection of the shade and studied him as he began to ascend a large rocky eminence that thrust itself up from the plain. When he slipped and fell back

onto the level surface, they were uneasy and, when he lay without moving, they became seriously alarmed. The car was hurriedly sent off to investigate but it had no sooner emerged round the side of the ridge than Preston rolled over and dragged himself painfully to his feet. The car hastily reversed out of sight, the occupants relieved to note that the writer had not looked in their direction.

It had all, of course, been an act. Preston had selected a spot with no sharp rocks and had fallen much more softly than had appeared from the distance. He had kept his eyes skinned for movement in the opposite direction from that in which the car had disappeared, working on the assumption that that had been meant to be misleading, and, as soon as he had spotted the car, he had risen slowly trying to give the impression that he had seen nothing. He walked unsteadily in a direction roughly parallel with the ridge until he came to a crater and then swiftly worked his way round under cover until he could attempt to approach the car from the rear. His intention had been to approach it unobserved and then, as if nothing had happened, ask to be taken back to the colony. As it was, in working his way round he observed some of the rocket port installations in the distance and, changing his plans, made for these, keeping as much under cover as possible. He was not spotted, since the others were frantically engaged in trying to locate his whereabouts in and around the crater, fearing that he had collapsed somewhere out of sight. As Preston entered the airlock of the lunar city, he was already beginning to worry about putting the minds of these others at rest. He was not the sort of person who could harbour resentment and his first call was therefore to the control office. He merely reported that he feared that a party might be looking for him and asked that they be contacted and informed of his safety. Then, as if nothing had happened, he resumed his survey of the lunar city.

Although the affair had been kept fairly quiet for obvious reasons, it had been necessary for several people to know and they, on hearing the result, spread the story around. The crew of the *Lucian* had their legs unmercifully pulled for the two days before they departed on their return trip and they left thankfully, with many bitter thoughts about the writer who had caused them to be the laughing stocks of the moon. Preston, on the other hand, while still having to stand up to some ribaldry about Castro Veblen, found himself popular overnight and his diffidence and desire to learn and to please kept him a firm favourite until his time of departure arrived. His stay was doubly enjoyable after his unpleasant experience on the trip out and he left with reluctance.

The *Jules Verne* which took him back to Earth was a sister ship of the *Lucian*. Preston boarded her warily. He feared that the crew of the *Lucian* might have passed on word to make things hot for him on the return trip, and he kept a weather eye open for booby traps and cautiously considered any suggestions of the crew members before he agreed to them. For two days nothing untoward happened although a few wisecracks were passed about Rocket Brydon but these he took good-naturedly. He was just settling down contentedly when the episode occurred.

Towards the end of the second day he was quietly reading in one of the cabins when there was a loud report, the lights went out and he heard the sudden hiss of escaping air. After the first start of panic, Preston calmed down and mentally chalked up to the crew a good mark for the effectiveness of the addition of total darkness to the familiar stage properties of the act. He cautiously raised himself to a standing position and gently propelled himself towards the source of the sound. It would be a very telling stroke to emerge from the cabin with the gadget in his hand and to present it to the crew with his compliments. As he touched the wall he groped forward with his hand and felt it suddenly forced with tremendous pressure against the hull. He tugged furiously to release it but it was stuck firmly against the metal. A cold wave of fear passed through his body as he realised that this was no joke. The ship had really been holed and in his stupidity he had let his hand become jammed against the opening. He could feel his hand going numb. Soon the deadness would travel up his arm and into his body. If help did not come soon there was no hope for him. He shouted wildly and heard his voice echoing backwards and forwards mockingly in the sound-proofed room.

The small piece of cosmic dust which had entered the ship had plunged along its axis, holing every cabin on the way and finishing up by wrecking the electric generator. Every member of the crew was therefore affected and in the darkness complete chaos reigned. Those who successfully reached their doors and entered the next compartment, found themselves no better off, for the air of the whole ship was being drawn off towards the original leak. Some people groped for space suits and others for torches and it is doubtful if anything would have saved the ship from destruction if the menacing hiss of escaping air had not miraculously ceased. With the greatest cause of panic removed, order was quickly restored and, while part of the crew saw to the connecting up of the stand-by generator, the rest sought the position of the leak and the source of its sudden sealing. The beams of their torches illuminated the helpless author impotently attached to the wall and an engineer was despatched outside to block the hole

temporarily while Preston was released and a suction plate put in his place. The luckless author had his hand dressed and was then bundled off to bed.

When he awoke, he discovered that the ship was back to normal. While he had slept, the damage had been repaired. But, in addition, glowing reports of Preston's resourcefulness and courage had been radioed on to Earth and the crew was preparing to treat him as a hero. Embarrassed both by this and by the stupidity of the actions which had in reality led to his being stuck to the leak, Preston attempted stumbingly to explain the true course of events. The crew brushed all his protestations aside and attributed them to his natural modesty. For the rest of the trip, the author lived like a lord. His slightest whim was instantly satisfied. Preston arrived on Earth in a dream, unable to believe that people could treat him so wonderfully.

But magnificent as the trip had been, the greatest thrill was awaiting him as he descended from the ship at the space port. Drawn up in line before the ladder was the crew of the *Lucian*, and Preston was deeply touched to see that every man's hand was raised in salute and in every man's lapel shone brightly the crimson and gold badge of the Rocket Brydon Fan Club.

—Gavin Neal

This Month's Cover

Readers who admire artist Quinn's regular work on both our magazines will be interested in knowing that the portrait of Sheamus on the front of this issue is in actual fact a self-portrait of Quinn himself. We thought this was particularly applicable as our young talented artist is an Irishman.

An agent is a person who looks after the interests of his client—in the entertainment world he is ungrammatically known as a "flesh peddler." So—the customers got what they asked for, real meat on the hoof.

AGENT

By E. C. TUBB

I don't envy Looie.

I'd like his money and I could use his car but I can do without his fat, his bad heart and his reputation. Especially his reputation. It stinks.

In a profession abounding with lice he was the biggest louse of them all. A modern parasite leeching his twenty, thirty, even fifty percent as a so-called 'agent,' he was hated by everyone from the regular ten percenters down to the lowest chorine who ever kicked a leg before the footlights.

I worked for him.

He told me once that it gave him a lift to have a man with a college education around, especially if that man had been in the front line of the football team and, as he was willing to pay for what he wanted, I didn't find it too hard to take his cash. But I didn't have to like him.

I was sitting in the outer office when the two men walked in. They looked odd but that was nothing. Most of the characters who wanted to see Looie looked odd. If they had been normal they wouldn't have wanted to see him in the first place. I put on my office expression as they halted before my desk.

"Mr. Samuels?"

"Who?" It took me a second to remember that Looie had been christened with his father's name. "You mean Looie?"

"I mean Mr. Lewis Samuels." The speaker, a tall, thin, pale faced man looked at a card he held in his hand. "I understand that this is his place of business?"

"That's right." I reached forward and took the card from him. It was dirty, creased and bore an almost indecipherable scrawl on the back. I nodded when I read it. "If you will wait a minute?"

I rose before he could answer and passed into the inner office. Looie looked up as I entered. As usual he was eating, he always was—nuts, chocolates, cookies, the man had an appetite like the hog he was. I threw the card onto his desk.

"Customers. Willie sent them."

"Willie?" He blew out a mouthful of crumbs and picked up the card. "He still around?"

"They must have let him out a week ago." Willie was a tout, a hanger-on at the race tracks, the bars, the pool rooms. A self-employed in-between man who drew a small commission from any business he sent our way. "You want to see them?"

"Wait." Looie frowned down at the card. "Better be careful. Check with Willie, this may be a trap."

I nodded and reached for the phone.

It took five calls and a lot of persuasion to contact the tout but I finally found him. He snapped into the phone as though I'd woken him up, which I probably had.

"Yeah?"

"Willie? Sam here. A couple of characters just walked in with a card coming from you. Know them?"

"Two men? Tall? Skinny? Sound like foreigners?"

"That's right."

"I know them. Gave 'em the card last night. They wanted a flesh peddler."

"A what?"

"You heard me. They want to buy some bodies." Willie chuckled. "What's the matter, Sam? Looie getting touchy over what they call him?"

"No." I knew that in Willie's parlance a flesh peddler was anyone who dealt in human talent. "Just wanted to check up. Looie thinks that it might be a trap."

"How can it? I only did a month in the pen, never mind for what, but that was out of town." His voice grew hungry. "Say, Sam, any chance of a touch? Those two guys are good business and I need some dough."

"I'll get in touch with you." I set down the receiver and nodded to Looie. "Willie says that they're O.K. Bring them in?"

Looie nodded.

They came straight to the point.

"We are interested in buying some humans," said the one who had spoken to me in the outer office. "I understand that you are in business to supply what we want."

It was a bit raw, even for Looie. He glanced towards me where I sat in a corner, just in case, then pursed his lips.

"I can supply talent," he admitted. "What did you have in mind? Hoofers? Canaries? Skin beaters?"

"Men and women."

"I know, but for what? Singers? Dancers? Musicians?" He frowned. "You putting on a show, or something?"

The man who had spoken before hesitated then turned to his companion. They muttered for a while, something I couldn't catch, then the tall guy turned to face Looie again.

"You confound me. Do you sell men and women, or not?"

"Sure I sell 'em, their contracts that is, but what sort and how many?" Looie was getting impatient. "You starting a road show? Night club? Do you want artistes for a spot south of the border?" He didn't leer as he said it but the hint was plain. "I can fix you up with as many as you want."

"A hundred? Two hundred?"

"As many as you want," repeated Looie dully. He glanced towards me and I stepped forward. I guessed that he was out of his depth.

"Mr. Samuels will supply any number of artistes you may require," I said. "Just tell him how many and what you are thinking of paying."

"Pay," said the man. He turned to his companion and muttered again. "We will pay one hundred dollars per head." He fumbled in his pockets. "Here."

I've heard tales of the old currency, I've even seen it in museums, but I never thought that I'd live to see a shower of gold scattered over a desk in a modern office. The coins made a lovely ringing sound as they fell, one or two of them rolling to the floor. I stooped and picked them up. They were gold all right. Double Eagles, Sovereigns. Escutadoes. Pieces of Eight. Golden Louis. I let them trickle through my hands in a gleaming shower.

"There is one thousand dollars in gold," said the stranger. "It is yours for ten head. I will pay you one hundred dollars for every man and woman you supply."

"Leave it with me," said Looie hastily. His fingers closed over the golden heap. "Come back tomorrow, same time, I'll have an answer for you by then."

"Tomorrow," said the man. He hesitated. "There are other things. You can supply them?"

"Sure." Looie didn't ask what. He was too intent on the gold.

After they had gone we counted the gold. I didn't know just how much there was, it would take an expert to value the coins, but in sheer weight the stuff came to well over a thousand dollars. Looie pursed his lips as he stacked the coins. "What do you think, Sam?"

"I don't like it." I reached for a sovereign. "There's something fishy going on. Normal people wouldn't pay their bills in gold, not when it's worth three times its face value. And the way that man spoke! He talked of men and women as though they were cattle."

Looie shrugged. He spoke about them the same way, probably thought of them like that too. "So what? If he's willing to pay a hundred dollars a head in this sort of stuff . . ." His voice trailed off as he reckoned his immediate profit. "Say it's worth double. Two hundred dollars plus twenty percent, no thirty, of all wages. Two hundred people." He whistled. "Grab ten off the books, Sam. Pick lookers. Young, hungry, and not too particular. I want to get on this gravy train."

"But what does he want them for?"

"How the hell do I know?" Looie snatched the sovereign from my hand. "Get busy!"

It wasn't hard to find ten chorines willing to work, place unknown. By the time the two men came back I had them lined up for inspection, contracts signed with a space left blank for the salary but with thirty percent of whatever it was scheduled for Looie's pockets.

The men didn't even look at them. They walked into the inner office and, after a while, Looie sent for me. I was curious, I'll admit it, and took a good look at them as I passed. Looie gestured with his hand.

"My assistant. He will fix up whatever you need."

"Will I?" I stared at the strangers. "What do you want?"

"A place where we can process the people you have sold to us." As before the man's voice was flat, stilted, utterly devoid of emotion. The way he said the words made me think of a foreigner. "We have certain machinery and we need somewhere large to set it up."

"Rehearse them, you mean?" I frowned. "There's the old theatre at the edge of town. It's been shut for the past ten years but I could get it for you."

"What about the warehouse down on Seventh-street?" Looie owned the warehouse and I could guess what he was after. "You could rent that for them. It wouldn't cost much to fix a stage and it's wired for power." He looked at the strangers. "That do?"

"Is it large?"

"Big enough to train a regiment."

They muttered together again, a hissing rush of sibilants, then the spokesman nodded. "It will do. You have the people?"

"Outside." I jerked my thumb towards the door. "Shall I tell them to report to the warehouse?"

"Tomorrow. You will show us the place?"

"We'll have you fixed up inside a day." Looie reached for the phone. "That's all, Sam. You know what to do."

Things moved fast after that. The first ten chorines went to the warehouse and that was the last I ever saw of them. More followed, lots more, and men too. At first I tried to pick those with some genuine talent then, as Looie began to get more greedy and as the strangers didn't complain, we skinned the books for all the broken down hams, the so-called comics, the dancers who had long forgotten their prime, the musicians with ten thumbs instead of fingers, the dregs and fringes of an overcrowded profession.

Each one we sent was paid for in gold and Looie seemed to get fatter and greasier every day. He was satisfied, why shouldn't he have been? But me? I was getting worried.

Little things started it. The utter impartiality of age or sex, talent or lack of skill of the people we sent them. The way the warehouse seemed to swallow them up without trace. The steady, incredible stream of gold which found its way into Looie's hands.

I wondered about that gold. I asked questions at the museums and from noted experts in numismatics. I even stole a piece I found lying in a corner and had it analysed. The gold was there, all right, the trouble was that there was too much of it. The assay showed at least fifty percent too much of the precious metal. The coins were, as I had suspected, counterfeit.

The whole thing didn't make sense.

The blow-up came when we had a visitor from the Health Department. He didn't waste any time with me but went straight in to Looie. I followed him as a matter of course, Looie was the sort of man to attract violence, and anyway, I was curious. The inspector came straight to the point.

"You own that warehouse down on Seventh-street?"

"Yes," said Looie cautiously. "Why?"

"It stinks. We've had complaints from the neighbours and you've got to clean it up." He stared at the fat man. "What are you running it as, anyway? A slaughterhouse?"

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Well it smells that way to me. Who's working there now?"

"Some people hired it from me," said Looie quickly. "I don't know what they wanted it for, experiments I think. Why don't you ask them?"

"The place is locked." The inspector stared his dislike. "As you're the owner it's up to you to stop the nuisance. Better get working on it, if you don't stop it we will and fine you into the bargain."

After he had left I sat on the edge of the desk and stared at Looie.

"Well?" ..

"Well what?"

"I had a feeling about those two men." I told him about the coin assay. "Now there are complaints of a funny smell down where they are working. If you ask me you're in trouble."

"Why? Where's the harm in a new theatrical company rehearsing in a warehouse?"

"Rehearsing?" I shrugged. "You can't believe that. We've sent them about two hundred men and women, all the drifters and hams in the business, and they still want more. Any legitimate producer would have screamed for his money back at the talent we've supplied. It would take a genius to get even a third-rate show out of them." I stopped him speaking with a stab of my finger. "Don't mention South America. I could swallow that for a few girls, yes, but not for those grandmothers, charwomen, and shapeless morons we've been supplying. And what of the men? Do they want to ship them south too?"

"They know their own business," Looie protested. "I'm just an agent."

"You're just a flesh peddler," I agreed. "That's what everyone calls you and . . ." I stared at him. "Say! Those men never said that they were going to rehearse. They spoke of processing the people we sent."

"Slang." Looie dismissed it with a wave of his pudgy hand. "They're foreigners and don't know our terms." He chuckled. "They even said they'd pay so much a head. A head! Who the hell would want to buy heads?"

"Headhunters," I said, and somehow it didn't seem funny. "Looie! Suppose that they were speaking the literal truth? Suppose that they really did think you were a flesh peddler, that you could sell men and women? Remember how they asked you to sell them humans? Remember how they never took off their hats or coats, even though it's June? And they paid you in gold at so much a head. And they processed the people we sent them. And now the Health Department is complaining about the smell."

"Sewers," Looie said. "That warehouse was condemned a long

time ago." He reached for a bowl of nuts. "Quit worrying. You talk as though those two men were Martians or something."

"Maybe they were." I swallowed as I thought about it. "Or time travellers, or robots, or anything you like to pick. They counterfeited gold coins, maybe they wanted to make sure that they had a currency good for any era. They wanted heads, and Willie sent them to you telling them that you sold flesh. How the hell would they know about slang? They must have taken him at his word."

"You're crazy," said Looie, but I could see he was shaken. "They're human, why should they want heads?"

"Does it matter? Suppose that we wanted something from the past. Neanderthal skins for example. We went back and found someone who said that he could sell them to us. Would we consider them human? We'd take what was offered." I snapped my fingers. "Perhaps they were traders from another planet or dimension or time. They wanted heads, brains rather, perhaps for study, perhaps for use. You told them you could supply them with what they asked for. You took their money and sent them people." I rose from the edge of the desk. "I'm going down to the warehouse and find out what's going on."

The place was silent when I got there. I discovered what the Health Department was complaining about straight away. The smell was sickening, the only thing like it I've ever experienced was once when I lived near a fertiliser plant.

Lighting a cigarette I managed to break in and take a look around.

No strangers. No machines. No signs of life. At one end of the place I found signs that seemed to show some electrical equipment had been used, scraps of wire and insulation. The dust was scuffed and disturbed by footprints and, in a small office-like room, I found the thing which sent me streaking out of the building towards the nearest phone. I found something else too, but I don't like to think of that.

The office contained two bodies. Two men, tall, thin, pale-faced men. Only they weren't bodies. They were like dummies, built of plastic and wire. They were empty and I mean that literally. Two hollow shells that had once contained—what?

The other thing was what made me retch and retch and keep on retching.

We had sent two hundred men and women down to the warehouse and they were still there. But not all of them. Each one had lost something vitally important. In the warehouse rested two hundred neatly decapitated corpses.

As I said, I don't envy Looie!

—E. C. Tubb

Since turning to full-time writing as a career Kenneth Bulmer's stories have improved immensely. His naturally high sense of humour is beginning to appear in his writing style and the story which follows indicates what can be expected of him in the near future.

PSI NO MORE

By KENNETH BULMER

Illustrated by OSBORNE

The imposing glass door with *Harvey Long, Personnel Officer*, in gilt lettering shattered into clinking ruin. The 'Per capita per diem' efficiency chart on Harvey Long's desk showed a marked slump as his pen squealed away from the ruler and splattered ink onto his shirt from the broken nib. He jumped to his feet, kicking his chair over, and stared at the wrecked door in shock at being snatched from his concentration. He heard Miss Bannister say: "Damn." She was most ladylike about it; but the quiet firmness of the remark broke the tension for Long and he laughed shakily.

"The quicker Professor Bissel gets here the better I'll like it." He walked across to the door and kicked the pieces of glass to one side. He made no attempt to look into the corridor. "This—well, this poltergeist is getting beyond a joke."

"We don't know if it is a poltergeist." Miss Bannister stopped her industrious rubbing out on the letter she was typing and blew gustily. Bits of shredded rubber flew. There was quite a scattering, like rice at a wedding, around her desk.



Long grunted sarcastically. "You tell me what can throw things without human agency, break windows, upset teacups and now smash my beautiful plate-glass door."

Miss Banister began typing again, her fingers a milky blur above the keys, her head bent in preoccupation. Long noticed a strand of red hair like a comet's tail lying against the curve of her neck. Her skin was very smooth and clear. Long took a deep breath.

"Laura! I'm talking to you!"

"I know, Harvey, I can hear you. But I must have this report finished for the Board's inspection."

Long sighed in exasperation and went back to his desk. "If it isn't bad enough that *Solar Spaceships* have a destruction-mania poltergeist wandering around the yards, I am saddled with a domineering female secretary." He looked across at her darkly. "I could replace you with a mass of electronic and cybernetic machinery."

She tossed her head without ceasing to type.

"And all that junk would make the tea as well, I suppose?"

Harvey Long retired to his 'per diem per capita' efficiency chart, baffled.

The next interruption was welcome. Professor Bissel was short and dark and myopic. He looked like a dusty sparrow searching for bread-crumbs from an automatic food vendor. Harvey Long wasted no time.

"The problem is, professor," he said as soon as the little man had found the chair proffered, "that something or other is creating havoc in the yards and offices of *Solar Spaceships*. The current theory is that it is a poltergeist. Personally, I don't know—all I want is for you to find out what it is and get rid of it. Production has gone down alarmingly."

Professor Bissel sniffed and raked in his bulky brief case. "I quite understand your anxiety, indeed, yes." He began to bring out coils of wire and odd looking boxes. "Yes, Mister Long, I think we can determine that for you."

What he was talking about now Long wasn't quite sure. Bissel's next remark made him doubt the wisdom of seeking the advice of this renowned parapsychologist.

"When did he die?" Bissel enquired sharply.

"Huh? Who?"

"The poltergeist, of course."

"Oh!" Long let out a breath of relief. "Sorry, I should have realised . . ." He caught a scornful sniff from Laura Bannister and felt the back of his neck warming. "We've only had two deaths from accident in the yards over the past three years. The last was, let's see—" he flipped open a record cabinet, "—eighteen months ago. Down on the main rocket assembly bay. Fellow called Atkinson. Slipped and fell two hundred feet, poor devil."

"Eighteen months." Bissel shook his head. "I'm afraid there must be some mistake, Mister Long. When did you say you first had this trouble with the poltergeist?"

"Oh, I'd say, well, about four months ago. More or less."

Professor Bissel began to collect his apparatus together. "I'm afraid I cannot be of service to you Mister Long. It is quite obvious from what you tell me that whatever is troubling you is not a poltergeist. No." He snapped his brief case shut. "Absolutely not."

Panic gripped Long. Bissel was his last hope. The Board's inspection was due, and he had to show them something concrete, even as wild a project as a poltergeist, to account for the drop in production and the shattered morale of the employees. It was his pigeon and he would have to find the answers.

"Wait a moment, professor," he said quickly. "Look, I contacted you as the pre-eminent authority on phenomena of this nature and I ask you to study the problem we have here." He wiped an unsteady hand across his forehead. "If this thing is not a poltergeist it must be something. We have had a series of accidents, stupid, inexplicable upsets and the morale of the workers is shot to hell." He glanced at Laura and coughed. "That is, I mean, professor, you've got to help me. This sort of mysterious happening is just your meat, surely?"

Bissel replaced his brief case on the desk.

"I am interested, Mister Long," he said pedantically. "And as you put your request in such strong terms . . ."

"You'll not regret it," Long all but babbled. "The Company will reimburse you handsomely."

Bissel had the grace to brush that aside. He began to shoot questions at Long briskly: type of occurrence, place, frequency, dates, witnesses. Before he had rattled on for five minutes Long interrupted.

"I'd better have my assistant in on this, professor. He's witnessed probably more of these occurrences than anyone else."

"As you please." Bissel was quite interested in that, though, Long observed: When Wilberforce came in answer to Long's buzz the professor eyed him keenly. He had produced a pair of double-lensed spectacles that made his face look like the gun-turret of a ship or popular cartoonists' ideas of men with their eyes popping out in astonishment. He very soon had Wilberforce compiling a comprehensive survey of the inexplicable phenomena that had been plaguing the yards.

Long wandered unobtrusively over to Laura.

She pulled the last sheet from her typewriter as he approached and batched it in with the report for the Board.

"There," she said with satisfaction. "Now old Admiral Cochrane can rant and rave all he likes. My job's done."

Long began to nod approval when Laura let out an anguished squeal of pure horror.

"A typo!" she shrieked. "Right on the front page! Oh, damn it!"

This time her remark, if still ladylike, was far more vehement. Long chuckled.

He was still chuckling when the phone rang. He answered and the grin slid off his face like snow in a thaw.

"All right," he said and his voice was hard and cold. "I'll be right over. Don't move anything! And for God's sake keep the men away!"

"What is—" Laura began. She stopped when she saw Long's face.

Trying to speak calmly, Long said: "There's been an accident. Professor Bissel, this should interest you." He deliberately pulled on his jacket. "For some reason a large crane decided to swing round although it was unoccupied and safely chocked. The grab hit Admiral Cochrane's car and knocked it against the blast pit. The car is balanced on the edge, a drop of a hundred feet below it, and swaying back and forth."

Long, by this time was out of the door and the rest were running with him down the corridor. He shouted over his shoulder.

"Nobody has any ideas yet on how to extricate the Admiral, his driver and the other passengers."

The situation at the blast pit was worse than Long had imagined. The gaunt grey finger of the crane stuck upwards now, almost as though crowing at the damage it had wrought. The crane operator was red-faced and angry, at the same time almost in tears as he repeated over and over that: "I left it safe, I tell you! I left it safe—it couldn't have swung!"

Cochrane's car, a sleek, low-hung blue shell, bore a large dent on the side and silver scratches raking back towards the tail. The driver's chalk white face peered from the front window. From the rear the admiral's choleric red face completed the patriotic colour-scheme.

He leant out of the window and shook his fist.

"Get me out of here!" he bellowed. "By God, I'll have someone court-martialled for this! Do something, someone, don't just stand there!"

The car swayed dangerously.

"Keep still, sir!" shouted Kelly, the manager.

"Still, sir!" Cochrane's bellow trumpeted across the pit. "If I'm not out of here in a—"

Harvey Long said loudly: "Shut up, sir. You'll have the whole thing in the pit if you don't sit quietly."

Admiral Cochrane might have erupted then, but the ominous lurch of his car quietened him abruptly. Long looked at Kelly in despair.

"Now what do we do?"

The car slid down a little further. Long saw that if it slid very much more nothing could prevent it from falling free of the edge and plunging to the bottom. He realised at once why the occupants had not climbed

out: the bulge in the side had effectively jammed the doors and to climb out the other side would precipitate them all into the pit. He turned to the crane operator.

"Get back in your cab and hook onto the car. Pull it up. And gently does it."

"Yes, sir." The man ran off, obviously glad that the instrument which had caused the trouble was to play the main part in rectifying the damage. Long watched critically as the crane grumbled, then the boom swung round and the grab dropped. The touchy moment would be when the magnetic plates made contact with the car. Too much push, and the car would topple a hundred feet.

He made a superhuman effort and refrained from shouting a cautionary word to the crane operator. The man knew his job and would only be distracted by gratuitous advice.

The grab swung, then steadied. It dropped lower. There was an audible "aah!" as the crowd expelled its breath in relief. Triumphantly, the crane swung upwards, the car spinning slowly beneath. It tracked across the pit, lowered and came to rest bouncily on its tyres on the roadway.

At once the far door opened and Admiral Cochrane bounded out. His face would have done excellent duty as a port side light. Long braced himself. Cochrane looked round at the assembled workmen and under the lash of his glare they melted away, scrambling back to their jobs. Cochrane advanced on the little group round Long and Kelly.

Cochrane opened his mouth to speak and Long had nerved himself to withstand the blast when Professor Bissel, a complicated instrument hung round his scrawny neck, walked backwards into the group, knocked into Cochrane and halted between the almost apoplectic admiral and the blast pit.

"Mister Long," Bissel piped. He fiddled with his apparatus. "Whose window is that?" He pointed at the banked mass of windows of the admin building reflecting the afternoon sun.

Long forced himself to remain calm. What the admiral would say when this old coot of a professor was out of the way he didn't care to dwell upon. The trouble was, Bissel had been his trump card, miserable though it might be, and now that card had turned the tables on him. Long refrained from looking at Admiral Cochrane.

"Well, Mister Long?" Professor Bissel was impatient.

Admiral Cochrane found his voice. Long had a profound gratitude that Laura Bannister was not within earshot. As it was, the efficiency, lineage, mentality and sundry other personal attributes of the employees of *Solar Spaceships* were examined with minute care and, in Admiral

Cochrane's opinion, were found to be gravely lacking. Harvey Long was grateful when they were all back in his office, Kelly evidently wishing to have none of the affair. On his own ground he felt more confident of arguing a coherent case. Admiral Cochrane slumped in Long's chair and glared at everyone impartially.

Professor Bissel was talking earnestly with Wilberforce, and Laura Bannister sat demurely at her desk. Long knew well enough that her pretty ears were sharply tuned into what the admiral was going to say. What he did say surprised Long.

"I must thank you, Mister Long, for your quick grasp of the situation and in effect for saving my life."

Harvey Long said: "Why—not at all—"

"And now," the admiral roared. "What's all this tomfoolery about poltergeists and mysterious happenings?"

Long explained rather incoherently. He finished by instancing the accident to Cochrane's car.

In the silence after his voice had died away he heard Professor Bissel's reedy tones whispering with Wilberforce. They were both looking at Laura Bannister and something about the apprehensiveness of their expressions gripped Long suddenly with a quite irrational dread. He looked at the girl.

She appeared to be deeply engrossed in her typing, the silent keys dancing under her fingers. Occasionally she stopped to make a correction, a procedure which made Long smile in spite of himself. His secretary had an almost phenomenal aptitude of typing at the same time as engaging in conversation or other activity. Whenever she made a mistake she cut loose with a hurricane of self-reproach, at least, so Long fancied were her outbursts. She had a gay, impulsive nature that did not lend itself to ominous looks from dusty professors and dry secretaries.

Watching her, Long saw her stop typing and make a little clicking noise with her tongue. That was out of deference to the presence of Cochrane. At the same time he was aware with a sort of detached horror of his ink bottle turning on its side and beginning to roll inexorably across the desk towards Admiral Cochrane.

The admiral started back with a squawk of disbelief.

The ink bottle reached the edge of the desk, and, moving quite slowly, toppled over, spraying a glistening fountain of Indian ink over the admiral's immaculate trousers.

The next moment held a horror that was, to Long, far worse than anything that had gone before.

Professor Bissel jumped up, his thin face animated and full of anxiety. He grasped Laura's hands in both his own.

He said: "Please, my dear madam, I beg of you, control yourself."

Laura said: "I beg your pardon?"

Wilberforce backed to the door and stood looking on with an expression of acute apprehension. Even Admiral Cochrane stopped his bellowing and ineffectual handkerchief dabbing and stared open-mouthed. Harvey Long lurched to his feet.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice shrill.

"Simply this, Mister Long." Professor Bissel released Laura's hands and stepped back. "This young lady is in possession of psi powers of some strength. She is able to manipulate objects—teleport them—quite easily." His voice faltered as Laura surged to her feet indignantly, "Please, do not excite yourself, otherwise—"

"Explain yourself!" Cochrane thundered.

"There is nothing now to explain. All the phenomena which has been troubling this Company is the work of this young lady." Professor Bissel began to take more equipment from his brief case. "This is most remarkable, most remarkable. I shall have to conduct some very extensive experiments . . ."

Long looked at Laura. This must be some kind of joke on Bissel's part. Laura couldn't be responsible for all the things that had been happening. Laura couldn't have knocked Admiral Cochrane's car into the pit!

Some such thought must have occurred to the admiral at about the same time. His bulky body jerked upright, the ink-stained handkerchief falling to the floor. He stalked across to Bissel and poked him in the chest.

"Am I to understand that this—this chit of a girl struck my car and nearly cost me my life?"

"I'm afraid so," Bissel said absently. He began to wire up some of the more complicated of his gadgets.

Cochrane took a deep breath and turned majestically towards Laura. Long shut his eyes. He opened them almost at once as the professor's voice cut in quickly.

"Please, Admiral. Do not excite the young lady. Hers is a very great power. There might be severe damage."

"By God! There will be severe damage." Cochrane pushed Bissel aside and advanced on Laura. "What do you mean by this? What's the idea, hey? Sabotage of the works, hey?"

"Please, Admiral." Bissel was frantic, his gadgets forgotten. "If you excite the young lady, I cannot be responsible for what might happen."

"Are you suggesting that I should kowtow to this chit of a girl? Are you two threatening me?"

"You don't understand." Bissel pushed up against the admiral, manoeuvring him away from Laura's desk. "The power this young lady has is immense, catastrophic. She could bring the whole building down about our ears."

Laura let out a little wail and sank back into her chair. Harvey Long went across to her with great strides and put his hands on her shoulders. He glared at Bissel and the admiral.

"Leave her alone, can't you? Now, Bissel, tell me plainly what this is all about."

Bissel gestured. "I have told you. Your secretary has been gifted with fantastically strong psi powers, notably that of telekinesis. We know quite a deal about these powers and someday it was inevitable that someone should be born with them, bearing in mind the evolution that has been taking place." Bissel's eyes glowed. Long could see how he was taking all this, as a damned scientific experiment, a chance to get his name in the hall of fame. "Mister Wilberforce here confirmed that the window I wished identified was the window of this office. That he has witnessed most of the phenomena means simply that he and this young lady—this extraordinary young lady—work in close conjunction with you."

"But why?" Long stammered. "Why? Laura! What made you do these things?"

She stared at him large-eyed, glistening tears forming and held checked. Her mouth trembled.

"Oh, Harvey, I don't know—"

Professor Bissel whitened. He said, quickly, like a man with his mouth full of peanuts: "Do not excite her, Mister Long!"

Admiral Cochrane shut his mouth firmly. He stood teetering on his feet, his hands clamped behind his back. Wilberforce skulked in the doorway, his hand steaming up the door knob. Long had the impression of static electricity building up ready to lash out in one crackling explosion.

Laura sat back in her chair, her body limp, crushed, "I'm a—a monster!" she whispered.

"Nothing of the sort!" Bissel snapped. He glared belligerently at Long. "Your secretary has great powers; but she had no conception of them. She has absolutely no control over herself. She is not to blame for what has happened."

"Thank God for that," said Harvey Long.

"From what I have been able to deduce in the short time at my disposal," Bissel said authoritatively. "This young lady stores these



psi powers, unused, and without any voluntary impulse on her part they break out when she is under a strong emotional strain, as when she is angry."

"Her temper—" began Long but Bissel cut him off peremptorily. He flicked his fingers at his equipment.

"I have been unable to determine the exact range and frequency. However, it appears that these psi powers operate at a distance that is directly in ratio to the strength of the anger felt; direction, probably on a line through the eyes. We must ensure that nothing excites or upsets your secretary."

"But I am upset," Laura said in a small voice. "Wouldn't you be if you were told you were a freak?"

"That is nonsense, my dear," Bissel said kindly. "When a person feels anger there is more to it than a mere release of adrenalin into the blood-stream. Hidden doors of the brain open and the mind is capable of performing deeds hitherto considered impossible and surmounting barriers that were thought to be impregnable. You have a very great and wonderful gift, my dear."

Laura sniffed and Long felt a great surge of affection for her. His fingers tightened on her shoulders and she put up a hand and placed it over his. Admiral Cochrane stumped back to Long's desk and sat down with a creak. Wilberforce tittered, the sound a dead rustling in the strained tension of the room.

Long said: "What do we do?"

Professor Bissel shrugged and then everybody's attention was jerked to Cochrane as though their heads were fixed to puppet strings.

"We've found out what we needed," the admiral said. "And the first thing is to get rid of that female. When I think of my car, over that pit—"

"Oh, no!" wailed Laura. She pulled free of Long and went across to stand pleadingly before the admiral. "Please, Admiral Cochrane, I'm happy here. I don't want to leave—"

"I'm sorry my girl, but what other course is there?"

Long cut in brusquely. "We can give Professor Bissel a chance to experiment. He can find a way to control—that is, to get Miss Bannister to control herself."

"Harvey! That sounds—"

"I know. I know. But you know what I mean, Laura," Long snapped testily. "Good God, girl, do you realise you've been sitting there, making typos, and throwing the whole works into an uproar with that temper of yours?"

"Mister Long—" Bissel said warningly.

"And my plate-glass door," Long went on unheeding. "Is that the way to treat a loving and indulgent boss?"

Laura Bannister's eyes snapped at Long. She looked to him like a goddess of the storm. He couldn't allow her to leave the Company, temper or no, not with this hanging round her neck. She was efficient,

quick and cheerful, and, of course, he loved her. He began to try to express something of his thoughts, but Laura's high voice chopped across his halting words.

"I'm very sorry, Mister Long, about your plate-glass door. I'm sure I didn't mean to break it. And if the rest of this inquisition has finished I think I'll pack my things." She wasn't crying, her face was flushed and there were lumps along her jaw that Long had never known she possessed. She walked across to her desk with the leashed fury of a tigress and jerked out a drawer. The big china teapot jumped out and fell onto her foot.

"Oh, damn it!" she cried.

The teapot rose into the air, circled and then hurled itself at the door. Wilberforce, with a gibbering yell of pure terror flung up his hands and caught the teapot like a first class Rugby player.

"That's enough!" roared Admiral Cochrane.

"Please, young lady," shrilled Bissel.

"Laura!" yelled Long.

A swirl of papers flew off his desk, clashed with the electric light, scudded round like autumn leaves. Laura had the desk drawer out now, half jammed against the sides. She wrestled with it. She said: "Damn!" again, in a less ladylike tone. The telephone sailed up towards the ceiling, then, restrained by its cord, began wild, dangerous sweeps round the room. A filing cabinet drawer shot out like a bomb and its contents exploded over the room. The ink bottle squirted the rest of its contents across Cochrane's face.

In less than thirty seconds the interior of Harvey Long's office looked liked a stricken field. The men were shouting at the tops of their voices, dodging missiles, flailing at floating papers, tripping over carpets that rose in ugly rippling life around their ankles. And all the time Laura was tugging at her desk handles, growing more and more angry as the contagion of the men's anger met and enflamed her own, saying things that profoundly shocked Long.

The door swung violently backwards and forwards on squealing hinges, making Wilberforce shriek and plunge headlong into the melee. He fell across Cochrane who bellowed like a bull and thrust him off to collide with Bissel who sprawled across the floor, his equipment dancing in crazy sarabands around his head.

Long dodged a valve assembly and jumped across to Laura. He caught her arm.

"Please! Laura! Stop it!"

She struggled away from him. "How can I? I can't stop!" Her typewriter began a ghostly typing and then canted and swung off the desk, parted Long's hair and crashed shockingly through the window.

Some time afterwards its destructive meeting with the concrete floated up as a muted note amongst the bedlam in the room. Long despaired of sanity ever again returning.

"Control yourself!" Admiral Cochrane thundered.

"Don't excite her," bleated Bissel.

"Excite her!" The admiral ploughed his way through a flock of papers that snowstormed round his head. "I'll do more than excite her!"

He reached out, obviously in the grip of an emotion that blinded him to his actions. Laura's desk tilted sharply, the end came over to stand up before the admiral like a parade ground drill. He walked into it, yelled something, and thrust it violently aside. Bissel dodged. Wilberforce jumped for safety, slipped and skidded across the floor on a rug that seemed possessed of independent life. The rug rose in the air, Wilberforce gibbering with the tea pot clutched to him.

Looking up, Long saw without any incredulity that Wilberforce was stretched out between rug and ceiling, held there as though Isaac Newton had risen from the grave to revoke his edicts.

"This is your damn fault, Long," the admiral howled, his choleric face an appalling spectacle. "You were told not to excite the girl!"

"I'm sorry, admiral—" Long started heatedly.

Laura's high voice said: "Don't go blaming him. It's not his fault at all. He was trying to help me, not like you who just wanted to get rid of me." She plunged after her desk to retrieve the rest of her belongings. Somehow, Long was on his knees at her side, helping her.

"Oh, get away from me, Harvey Long," Laura said.

"If you'll only calm down, Laura," Long pleaded. "I'm sure we can talk things over with the admiral. You won't have to leave. I can fix—"

"You've already fixed too many things, Long," Cochrane shouted.

"Get that—that witch out of here!"

"Witch, am I?" sobbed Laura. She thrust the last of her belongings into her case. It was difficult to see across the room now; papers were in a continual blur of motion, solid objects ripping their way through the murk with deadly speed. The electric light bulb blew out with a minor atomic explosion. Laura laughed gleefully and Long saw with a dazed horror that she was at last enjoying her eerie gifts of telekinesis.

At this chaotic moment Wilberforce dropped the teapot.

Laura collapsed without a sound, the teapot striking her head with a sound that curdled Long's blood.

The hush that followed was so profound that the steady *drip, drip* of spilled tea boomed louder than a thousand Niagaras.

For one enormous second Long thought that Laura was dead.

Then he had her head cradled in his arms and heard the faint whisper of her breath. The room was a white mass of paper mounds covering broken and shattered pieces of office equipment. Long felt a venomous satisfaction when Wilberforce, the power upholding him withdrawn, fell clumsily to the floor.

"Thank God that's over," Admiral Cochrane said, mopping his forehead.

Professor Bissel was looking with deep concern at Laura. He shook his head sorrowfully. "Such a shock, when her powers were at full stretch, will most likely have destroyed them." He sighed. "Such a waste."

Later, when Laura was sitting white faced drinking tea, Long didn't care tuppence about the waste. All he knew was that Laura was normal, like other people, again. Her psi powers had been destroyed completely. Cochrane behaved very well over the matter, thanking Professor Bissel sincerely for his efforts. Bissel chirruped disconsolately, regretting the lost opportunity.

Admiral Cochrane had the last word.

"And, Professor Bissel," he said, his red face jovially sly. "Mind you keep a sharp eye on their children."

Holding Laura's hand, Long was so happy and relieved that it was not until much later that he became worried over the prospect.

—Kenneth Bulmer

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Write, call, or telephone

Even a robot could be expected to pick up a regular routine, especially when the routine follows a set pattern over a period of years. A robot might eventually assume (from an indoctrinated viewpoint) that such a routine was as good for itself as for a human.

HILDA

By W. B. HICKEY

"Mmmm," said Mrs. Williams. "Kiss me again."

"Mmmm," said Roger. He kissed her again.

Stupid woman, he thought. Old enough, if not attractive enough, to be his mother. But rich. Mrs. Williams, Roger thought, could be worked for plenty.

They were on the balcony off Roger's bedroom. In the night sky rockets traced paths of fire on their way to the Moon and Mars. Roger's shirt was open to the third button and Mrs. Williams was pressed tight against his broad, tanned chest.

"Ohhh," said Mrs. Williams. She was completely limp. "You're so strong, Roger. When you squeeze me like this it hurts."

"The strength of my desire," Roger said. He squeezed harder.

She was now in the bag, Roger knew from many such experiences, and good for anything from jewelled cuff links to an investment in a play starring Roger. A dozen women had made that same investment, but the only lines Roger had ever memorized were those of his love-making routine.

"You're hurting me," Mrs. Williams gasped.

"I can't help myself," said Roger, and squeezed her even harder, deliberately.

The door of his bedroom burst open and a man rushed in. He was middle-aged and he had a paunch and he was the chairman of the board of Tri-Planet Mining, with assets of over ten million.

He was also Mr. Williams.

"You skunk!" he shouted. "You dirty, wife-stealing—" He waved a gun at Roger.

"James!" shrieked Mrs. Williams.

"Hilda!" shouted Roger.

Something big and shiny, with arms of chrome steel and an alloy middle, came storming into the room. It took the gun away from Mr. Williams and tucked him under one arm. It scooped up Mrs. Williams, who had rushed to her husband's aid, and tucked her under the other arm.

It carried them from the apartment and slammed the door behind them.

"I will make you coffee," Hilda said metallically. "I will make you Swedish meatballs."

"Damn!" Roger cursed. He held up his cupped palm in a dramatic gesture. "I had her, damn it!"

"No food," said Hilda.

"Who said anything about no food?" Roger demanded.

Hilda marched toward the kitchen with measured tread. Over her shoulder she said, "The man was here for the rent today."

Roger cursed landlords in general and this one in particular. "What did you tell him?"

"You were not at home."

Hilda had paused and was regarding Roger with glowing plastic eyes. He tried to look melancholy.

"Hilda," he said, "we are broke."

"Broke," said Hilda. She had been through this before.

"It hurts me to ask this of you, Hilda. But there's a factory I know of, a place where they use leased robots—"

"A factory."

"Yes. Honestly, Hilda, it'll only be for a while. I know you need new rheostats and you haven't had a pressure check in a year—" He patted her shoulder. "Say you'll take the job."

"I will take the job," Hilda said. "I will make Swedish meatballs." She clumped into the kitchen.

What he would have done without Hilda, Roger didn't know. He hated to think about it, even. You couldn't get another one like her for love or money.

She was definitely a female robot, smaller than the all-purpose kind, with real domestic aptitudes built in. She was a fine cook, an excellent laundress, and she had a woman's memory for trivia.

Hilda had been built by a Swedish firm for its president, and Roger had got her from the president's widow. What had become of the widow afterward, Roger was not sure. Maybe she'd made good her threat to commit suicide.

One thing about Hilda, Roger thought. She'd never commit suicide. And no matter how often he took advantage of her she'd never threaten him with harm; the only emotion a robot could have was love for its owner.

"More coffee, Hilda," Roger said, downing the last of the meatballs. He felt much better. "And press my flannels. I'm going out."

It was a bad night. The only likely woman Roger ran across was with her husband, who watched her closely. And recurring thoughts of the Williams fiasco made Roger drink too much. He came home with a headache.

Hilda was already setting the table for breakfast. "A woman called."

Roger's nostrils flared. "Who was it?"

"Alice," she said.

"Hell," he said disgustedly. Alice Carter was only eighteen and wouldn't have a dollar of her own for years. And the young ones were so easy he couldn't even feel he was keeping his hand in.

"She cried," Hilda said.

"They always cry."

He bit into a piece of toast that was done exactly to his taste and picked up the facsimile newspaper Hilda had laid beside his plate.

He said, "Oh, oh."

Mr. and Mrs. James Williams had crashed in their helicopter. A 'copter control tower had overheard snatches of argument between them and Mr. Williams had forgotten to set his automatic altitude controls. Mrs. Williams was in serious condition. "Too bad they weren't killed," Roger muttered.

Or too bad it wasn't Mr. Williams who was in serious condition. With the kind of childish reasoning of which husbands were capable, he was a sure bet to blame Roger for the crash. And ten million dollars could make trouble.

"Hilda," Roger said, "I think we'll go to Paris. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Paris," Hilda said. She had been through this before too.

While she clumped off to begin packing, Roger stood and stared moodily out the window. Sometimes it seemed that no matter how hard a man tried he couldn't get a break . . .

"Packed," Hilda said as she marched back into the living room.

Roger was sitting on the couch, his head in his hands. Hilda regarded him. "Packed," she said again.

"In a minute," Roger said. "I've got an awful headache."

"I will bring headache pills."

She clumped to the bathroom and clumped back, bearing the pills and a glass of water. After Roger had swallowed the pills Hilda brought the brandy from the sideboard and poured him a stiff drink.

"I will make more coffee," she said.

It was really wonderful, Roger thought, the way Hilda knew exactly what to do. Once she learned a routine she never forgot it.

Suddenly Roger felt much better. The brandy was warming his stomach and making his head swim. He ran after Hilda and flung his arms around her alloy middle and hugged her.

"Hilda," he said. "You're wonderful! I love you."

"You only say that."

"No, I mean it. Honestly."

"Kiss me," Hilda said.

It was so vaguely familiar it puzzled him, and yet so funny he had to laugh. And because the brandy was making him feel so good he actually did plant a kiss on Hilda's face-plate.

"Mmmm," said Hilda. "Kiss me again."

"Hilda! Where did you ever learn such things?"

"I listened."

So that was why the routine seemed so familiar. What a robot!

"Hilda," Roger laughed, "there's nobody in the world like you." His laughter took on a twinge of pain. "Hilda! You forget those arms are steel. When you squeeze me like this it hurts."

"The strength of my desire," Hilda said metallically.

"You're hurting me!"

"I can't help myself," said Hilda. She squeezed harder.

Roger went limp in her arms. She let him go and he fell to the floor. He made a sound in his throat and blood ran from his nose. Then the sound stopped and the blood stopped too.

Hilda marched to the closet and got the cleaning things and wiped up the spots on the rug. She lifted Roger and laid him on the couch.

She put the cleaning things back and clumped to the kitchen.

"I will make coffee," Hilda said.

—H. B. Hickey

Wilson Tucker's fame as an author continues to expand in leaps and bounds, his most recent novel Wild Talent is to be published in hard covers this year by Michael Joseph Ltd. He is, however, quite at home with the short story, as the following polished gem shows.

MY BROTHER'S WIFE

By WILSON TUCKER

There are three of us—three brothers.

Harley is the oldest of the trio and in many ways the weakest. The family had been in the habit of telling each other Harley would go far someday. Harley went as far as a downstate mental asylum. He'd been in there for several months and I can't get in to see him, not with the family balking me, not with my record.

Louise put him there.

Jimmy is the youngest, he's a born hell-raiser but strictly on the legit side. The kind of a guy you don't have to dare to do something—he will plunge in and tackle it just for the hell of the thing. But it has to be on the level. He uses *me* as the shining example of what not to be. Jimmy was in the air force during the war and spent most of his time overseas flying the Hump, messing around in some of those nameless pockets in Burma. He likes to brag about the time he flew Stilwell.

Jimmy is married to Louise. I don't see her, either.

In age, I'm between those two brothers but there is no other resemblance, and as any member of the family will tell you in nice language, I'm not worth a tinker's dam. The old black sheep label was pinned on me early—a stretch in the reform school when I was seventeen because I had figured out a way to make, and use, a black powder bomb after watching a Paul Muni gangster picture. And a lush but rugged pre-war life out on Chicago's southwest side while toting a gun for a ward heeler, at the magnificent sum of a hundred bucks a week.

That was all washed up when they drafted me; the only thing that changed was the clothes and the pay. I went right on toting a gun for thirty bucks a month and grub until Congress got big hearted and raised the pay. And I got smart and bought me a softer job driving a car for the brass.

I'm back on my own now, working for nobody but myself and still carrying a gun for sentimental reasons. I've been waiting a long time to get my sights on Jimmy's wife.

People tell me she's a knock-out, something a movie scout should stumble over. I wouldn't know—I've never laid eyes on her although she and the kid brother have lived in Chicago for over a year. He runs his own bookstore down near the Loop, something he bought with the money he saved up during the war plus his discharge dough. When I first found out what he wanted, I made it a little easier for him to buy out the former owner at a reasonable price. I keep a boy down there working for him to see nothing goes wrong—some dope might get the bright idea that a bookstore, like a dry cleaning joint, could be in the market for protection.

I am *not* welcome in his house unless she is away from home. So I always telephone in advance.

I drop around for an evening of bull and beer every once in a while to pick up the news on Harley and the folks, and to study Jimmy. We get along fine and he'd be a helluva swell guy to chin with if only he'd shut up that bragging about what he did in the war. I keep wondering what he's thinking about and never find out. I always ask him how the store is coming along and is he making any money, and he usually tells me it's rolling in—which I already know. But he never says a word about how he's getting along with her and he never asks about my business. We leave it at that, but I keep wondering.

I usually slip him some dough and he passes it along to the family with a donation of his own, because we both know Mom would refuse it if she guessed it was coming from me. Once in a while he has a fresh word on Harley but it is always bad—the guy will never snap out of it. And that's the point of the matter.

Louise is responsible for Harley being in the hatch, and I keep wondering if Jimmy knows that.

I used to ask about her, back at the beginning. Used to wonder out loud when I'd get to meet my nifty new sister-in-law, used to pass out hints I was entitled to a kiss. He became embarrassed every time I brought up the subject. He parried my questions with unsatisfactory answers and offered all kinds of feeble excuses for her continued absence. The hints brought me nothing but pained silence. After a while I began to get the idea and one night I asked him about it.

"I never have seen her, kid. What's the inside—that black sheep stuff again?"

He avoided my eyes and wasted several seconds reading the small print on the beer label. Somewhere in the house a gnawing rodent sounded loud in the silence.

"Come on," I coaxed him, "I'm not going to get mad."

He jerked back his shoulders and stared at me. I had the answer before he opened his mouth.

"I'm awfully sorry, Bud. I guess I opened my mouth once too often, or maybe Mom tipped her off, I don't know. I guess she's afraid of you, Bud. It's a crazy idea and I've told her a hundred times you're my own brother and wouldn't hurt a fly, but—well, you know women."

Yeah, I knew women, knew lots of them, but she was the first one I'd found who was afraid to shake hands with me. It didn't sound right, didn't tie in with her background; she'd hung around plenty of tough characters in the Burma country.

"She's seen too many bad movies," he went on, "or read too many books I guess—even over there. She thinks you're a cross between a bloody newspaper gangster and a storm trooper." He ran his hand through his hair and there was something else on his mind, something he didn't tell me. He was embarrassed. "I can't help it, Bud, and I apologize for it, but hell, that's the way it is."

That was the way it was.

By "even over there" he meant her homeplace, somewhere in Burma or India or wherever the hell he picked her up. He said once it was a mudtown called Walawbum but I couldn't find it on a map. He found her there and I suppose you can find anything and everything in that country if you stay long enough; she was, he told me later, a half-caste of some sort, Russian and Chinese maybe, who had drifted around here and there with the coming of the Japanese war to the mainland.

If she was a half-caste, I pointed out, how come the name Louise? He laughed and told me I couldn't pronounce her real name if I tried,

so everybody called her Louise. Jimmy was positive on one point : she was as attractive as they come. The family took her in when he brought her home, which was equal to an underwriter's bond unless she mesmerized them.

"Well hell, kid," I said, "it's tough, not so much as getting to see her. Hey—got a picture around anywhere?"

He gave me a lopsided grin, half an apology and half a defence. "No, Bud. I'm sorry, but I can't even offer you that much. She won't stand still for it. She's the best wife in this whole cockeyed world today—she'll do anything for me, except that. She won't let me take her picture."

"What?"

"Nope, on the level. You see, that was one of the things she brought up when I married her." He broke off to stare at me, wondering just how much he could say. "To make it plain, Bud, before I could marry her I had to promise no pix. That was her one and only condition of marriage. I can't go back on my promise."

He wouldn't. I knew him too well for that.

"Religion or something?" I asked him.

He nodded absently. "I suppose so. She's from the backwoods over there, you know. People aren't so particular about what goes on around them but you'd better not step on their taboos. I married *her*, not her superstitions or whatever. She's got a lot of funny little tricks you'll never find out here in the civilized world, and I like every one of them."

I said I guessed I understood.

"She told me her ancestors would never forgive her if she permitted a photograph to be taken. And Bud, I don't want to get her in a jam with her ancestors." He was grinning at me in high humour but it faded. "I'm head over heels in love with her—and I don't want that to be jammed, either."

So I dropped the subject and kept hoping I'd meet her accidentally sometime, but I never did.

Harley had been different—Harley had come and gone as he pleased, when he pleased, saw her quite a lot. He went out with them, stayed in evenings with them, everybody got along fine. Until that night Jimmy called me from home to say the cops had carted Harley away to the hatch.

I suppose I could have stolen a picture of her, could have put a camera tail on her, or I could have tailed her myself and stopped her in the street if I wanted to go that far—but I didn't. Jimmy would raise hell and cut me off. And I didn't want that; his continued

friendship and now my only contact with the family meant more to me than just satisfying my curiosity about his wife's looks. I didn't fully accept his explanation of the woman's refusal to meet me, but I said to hell with the whole thing and kept my nose to the grindstone.

Meanwhile I had developed a lead in the asylum.

I wasn't allowed inside. The family laid down the law there and my Cook County record backed them up, so I did the next best thing and picked up a man who was already on the inside. State employees are notoriously underpaid and this one was greedy and was more than willing to supplement his income, once I convinced him I wanted nothing more than reports on Harley. I began to get them. How he was getting along, his lack of real progress toward recovery, his flights of fancy, his treatment at the hands of the employees, and so forth.

His flights of fancy interested me. They always included Louise. He was crazy about Louise. Crazy.

He talked about her all the time and the words and sentences which were passed along to me didn't make sense. They made just as little sense to his doctors and his progress chart never improved. I put that down as natural in his condition until some of the words, coming in almost daily repetition, bored into me as being queerly unnatural. The more I mulled them over the more curious I grew as to what prompted them. I realised my lead wasn't enough.

The guy had a daily contact with Harley, he could pick up words like a phonograph record and play them back to me just as straight, he could look after him and steer him clear of some of the knocks, but he wasn't sufficiently informed to discuss Harley's case with me. I needed a doctor in the institution and most doctors followed their stupid code of ethics. Which meant I couldn't simply pick up the telephone and ask.

I looked over the hospital staff and began working on a new lead. He lived in Chicago, he wouldn't exchange his ethics for my money until he had great need of it. That might take several weeks, but I started in. A thief stole his car. Someone broke into his house one night and ruined his medical library. He was held up twice in one month. It went along like that and I bided my time.

But while I waited for him to soften I started backtracking.

Jimmy and Louise had lived for some months in San Diego after his discharge, and had then moved on to Phoenix. They spent a couple of years in Phoenix, finally coming to Chicago when the bookstore deal opened up and he decided it was his life. San Diego wouldn't be so difficult—I knew contacts there—but Phoenix was something else again.

In the end I hired a private eye to investigate the Phoenix story, and telephoned a friend in San Diego to look into things there. Some weeks went by and the Phoenix reply arrived first—the detective did a good job. Jimmy and his wife had lived there long enough to make an impression on the neighbours.

Jimmy was the same old Jimmy, in Phoenix. But Louise was somebody else. I kept Harley in mind and studied it.

Jimmy, according to the detective's innocent report, had been living with a different woman while in Arizona, but one who passed as his wife of course. Her name was Louise—the neighbours said she was a perfect darling. The Louise in Phoenix was painted so clearly in the report that I was able to picture her as I read it. Five-foot-one, about a hundred pounds, perhaps twenty-three years old, deep auburn hair worn in bangs, ice-blue eyes, freckled face, upturned nose, small mouth, slim neck, moderate bust, no appreciable hips, tiny feet, lively and vivacious. A carefree and childish manner, a casual dresser—usually slacks and shirt—and occasionally a dramatic burst of temper.

But that wasn't the Louise living in Chicago.

Several days afterward the man in San Diego called. It had been tougher there, their stay had been a shorter one, the neighbours not so observant, and many years had passed. The meagre description my contact furnished said Jimmy was still Jimmy in San Diego, but Louise . . .

Louise was a raven-haired beauty with a throaty voice and a figure to make you turn and stare. The apartment house manager remembered her because she had looked like Joan Bennett in the movies; there was such a striking resemblance that he had once asked for an autograph and had been rudely turned down. He remembered her beautiful black hair.

But that wasn't the Louise in Chicago, either.

Jimmy says she's a feast for the eyes—what he has always dreamed of. The tall, willowy girl you find in advertising models, a wealth of hair the colour of ripe wheat on a bright summer day, hair that draped about her shoulders. She is almost as tall as Jimmy and he is five foot ten, she has the ice-blue eyes of the girl in Phoenix but the straight nose and gentle, curving lips of someone else. Skin as fine and clear as a child's, without a mar or blemish—no freckles. Rather flat-chested, as may be expected of a woman with her build, and a small hip line. That was Louise in Chicago.

Jimmy had changed wives three times and they were all the same girl—he pretended—that he had brought home from the Orient. Picture a half-caste as a redhead with freckles, or a tall slim blonde. He had married her in Burma—he pretended—and she would stand

for no nonsense about photographs. But he spent a lot of time thinking over something. My other brother, Harley, would be spending the rest of his life in an asylum because Louise had a lot of funny little tricks you'd never find out here in the civilized world.

It was time to pay another visit to his house. And as usual I phoned first that I was coming over, and as usual she was nowhere to be seen when I arrived. Jimmy and I settled in the kitchen with the beer. And somewhere a mouse or a rat was still raising hell in the woodwork.

"Say, kid, your wedding anniversary is coming up pretty soon, ain't it? What do you and the wife want?"

"Is it?" He frowned, put down the can of beer and counted his fingers. "By gosh, you're right. It slipped my mind. Aw—we don't need anything."

"That's not the point, you're going to get something just the same. What'll it be?" I laughed. "A jar of freckle cream for Louise?"

"She doesn't have freckles, You—" and he stopped in embarrassment, realizing that I did not know her face.

"The hell she doesn't! You said she did."

"I did? You're all wet, Bud. Her skin's like milk."

"Well, maybe I am, but I'd swear you said freckles in one of those old letters—from Phoenix I think, some time back."

He shook his head and traced a design on the table top, a long snaky line. "Guess I was mixed up, or you read it wrong. No freckles." He tried to keep the concern off his face.

"Skip it," I suggested. "Name something nice, then."

He was morose the rest of the evening and I got out of there early.

Harley was far gone—he had been put away for nearly a year with positively no sign of improvement—when my doctor finally got around to my point of view. It had taken him a long time to throw off the inner feeling that he was betraying himself and his profession, that he was accepting rotten money, but he finally reached the desperate stage when he could sit down and talk to me without too many mental reservations.

"What about Harley?" I asked him.

"Incurable. You should know that."

"Sure I know it. That's not why I'm here. I'm here to find out why Harley went that way, what caused it? You've listened to him."

"Your brother, Mr. Wyatt, is suffering from rather common causes which affect a good many people in today's world, and that is the root of it. The world and its emotions are moving too fast, far too fast for some of us, and he was one of those who could not keep his footing. He stumbled. It happens about us every day I regret to say. Modern

life is too involved, too complex and unyielding in its demands, for some men to handle with ease. They simply fail under the load—it is a retreat from a life they cannot or do not wish to cope with.”

“Keep the lectures for the old folks, Doc. I’m asking about Harley.”

“Harley is—” he broke off and frowned. “Precisely what are you seeking, Mr. Wyatt?”

“Things. Have you met my sister-in-law, Louise Wyatt?”

“No, I’m afraid I haven’t. I’ve heard of her, of course.”

I shot him a glance. “I’ll say you’ve heard of her. Harley raves about her all the time. What about that?”

He was instantly ill at ease and sought to avoid an answer. Some of those mental reservations again.

“Well? What about it?”

“Eh . . . I believe he does mention the woman.”

“You bet he does—have you listened to him?”

“Naturally I attempt to understand my—”

I broke in. “Have you listened to him?”

“Yes. Yes, I have.”

“Sounds screwy, doesn’t it?”

“Which is why he is under our care, Mr. Wyatt.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Anybody who carries on like that is asking to be locked up. Where does he get those ideas—about a woman who changes her shape to look like somebody else?”

The doctor stared at me and wondered just how much he could say. I guessed his mind, made an impatient gesture.

He said slowly, “Frankly, Mr. Wyatt, your brother’s troubles seem to arise from an . . . ah, fixation upon the person of your sister-in-law. I have reason to believe his mental unbalance came about when he possibly . . . ah, declared his love for her and she spurned him, of course. He perhaps accompanied his declaration of affections with some desperate plan for the two of them to run away someplace. Naturally, it never occurred to him that she would refuse, but when she did he was so overwrought he lost possession of his faculties.”

“Boiling that down, you mean he blew his top when she laughed at him.”

“That is correct.”

“And then what?”

“In a given situation such as this we may expect one of two subsequent possibilities. The patient either continues to love the object of his affection by mentally refusing her declination, or he approaches a natural opposite and dislikes her violently. This latter, I may add, happens rather often in everyday life but the spurned lover seldom comes to our attention because he is able to assimilate the load, either by recourse to liquor, physical exertion or simply forgetting the woman.

"Only occasionally are they brought to us; more often they find themselves in jail for assault upon the body of the woman, or their more successful rival."

"Harley was really nuts about Louise?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"And now, I suppose, he hates her guts?"

"Yes. In his mind's desire to seek revenge upon her he is mentally casting her into all sorts of unflattering moulds and evil guises, wishing upon her every imaginable kind of ugly form—a snake perhaps, or a lizard, a rat, or some other predatory animal or reptile."

I let that soak in and again wondered what was on Jimmy's mind. In some of our recent kitchen conversations he had been a mile away from me.

"I take it that you don't pay much attention to his ravings—about Louise being a different woman?"

"Of course not. We—" The doctor broke off to stare at me.

"You have put that rather oddly, Mr. Wyatt."

I took the report from the Phoenix detective out of my pocket and handed it over to him.

"Read this, Doc. If I told you what I meant by that crack, you'd try to lock me up too."

He skimmed through it, smiling.

"This seems to concern your brother James, and his wife."

"Yeah. It concerns her, mostly. There's an accurate description in there of the woman when she lived in Phoenix. Too bad you haven't met her here, in Chicago."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because she looks like this now—" and I gave him a full picture description of Louise as she appeared now. By this time he had read the Phoenix descriptions.

"A different woman, obviously," he said, still smiling.

Finally I told him what she was like in San Diego. He shook his head.

"I dislike to insert myself into family affairs, Mr. Wyatt, but apparently your brother has been living with three separate women, each of whom posed as his wife and used the same name. It's done, of course."

"Of course. But I see you don't connect this up with Harley's ravings?"

He glanced at me rather sharply. "Of course not!"

"No," I echoed with open sarcasm, "of course not. Did you ever hear of a case of a woman changing her shape—form?"

He was now smiling broadly.

"I believe I see your objective quite clearly, sir. Yes, I've heard of such things—in mythology. Let me see . . . there are witch-women who may change their shape at will; there are were-wolves and were-tigers, that is, half human and half tiger who may assume the guise of a beguiling woman; oh, there are any number of fantastic creatures in mythology who use a human form to gain some immediate goal or mislead some poor man. I should point out, however, that that is mythology."

"Harley's pretty far gone on that one idea," I said. "Maybe he's been reading the fantasy books."

The doctor thought I was serious. "It is possible yes. A great deal of mythology is taught children, fairy tales and that sort of thing. Some modern fiction employs it as a base. *Dracula* is a case in point. And many magazines today cater to the adult who hasn't fully left the fairy tale behind him. Something of that sort may have given your brother the idea of casting the woman into different moulds."

"How about the chance," I asked softly, "of Harley actually having seen something? Something different?"

The doctor pin-pointed me. "Oh, not a chance! Superstitions belong to the old world, to Europe and Africa." He was watching me closely. I could guess his thoughts.

"And India maybe," I agreed, "or Burma."

"India is teeming with superstition."

I got up—this guy was a blank wall. "Sorry to take up so much of your time, Doc. I guess that's that. The stuff got on my mind and I had to talk to somebody about it. I had to see if there was anything behind Harley's raving."

"Just be careful, Mr. Wyatt, that it doesn't weigh too heavily on your mind. Our population out there is always increasing." He pointed to the detective's report. "By the way, did by chance your brother Harley read this document?"

"Thinking maybe *that* sent him off? No, I picked this up a couple of months ago, didn't get started on it until he was locked up and started talking about a different woman. Ties in, don't it, Doc?"

"I don't leave nothing to chance, I can't afford to. And listen, as a matter of curiosity, supposing these witch-women could change their shape from one woman to another, supposing *one* of them was a brunette in San Diego and a little redheaded squirt in Phoenix and still something else in Chicago? Supposing all these women were the same woman, just changing around to please her husband—you know, give him a taste of everything? How could you tell which woman was the real one?"

"What?"

"Which one of those three is the real McCoy, with the others just window dummies?"

That one sent him off into a spasm of laughter.

When he quieted again, he said, "It isn't a question of discovering the true woman, Mr. Wyatt. I'm afraid you weren't listening closely. The problem there, if such a problem existed, would be to discover the true *form* from which the woman sprang. She would not be a woman at base."

"Oh? No?"

"No. At base she would be an animal, reptile or bird. She would be a woman when the object of her intentions, a man, first saw her. Afterwards, depending upon whether or not the man discovered part or all of her secret, she might assume the forms of various other women to please him. In the twinkling of an eye she could become the image of almost any woman on earth that he desired."

"All dames in the body of one, eh?"

"All women in the body of something," he corrected me. "You would never discover which woman-shape was the basic one because *none* were. The pretty face of the fairy tale is but a snarling beast beneath—a tiger, a crocodile."

Or, I thought to myself after I left the doctor, a monkey, or a rattlesnake, or a cockroach, or an anteater, or a wolf, or the rat I always heard gnawing in the walls. Jimmy's wife had a lot of funny little tricks you'd never find in the outside world. Jimmy said so.

He had also told me he was head over heels in love with her, meaning all three of her I guess.

I could put a man in the house with a camera, using infra-red film and flash bulbs for night work. Neither of them would see the flash and take alarm but she might hear the noise of the shutter and I wouldn't get my picture. I'd not only lose the picture, I'd lose Jimmy—he'd know.

In the end I decided to risk it myself.

A midnight fire next door to the downtown bookstore cleared the way; someone telephoned and the lights went on in their bedroom. Scarcely five minutes later Jimmy came running out of the house half dressed, half awake. He whipped the car out of the garage, backed to the street, and with a farewell toot on the horn vanished with a roar of exhaust.

I waited behind the garage a full half hour before letting myself in the kitchen door, to pad across the room in stocking feet. The lights in the bedroom had long ago been turned off and the house was quiet.

I hoped I had given her time to go back to sleep, to relax her vigilance now that he was gone. And I found myself wondering why she had always avoided me.

Harley had been welcome at the house and Jimmy had taken her to visit the family often enough. But she had refused to see me, to let me see her. Jimmy's vague excuses about my past, my present, weren't entirely acceptable. She was afraid of me for some other reason; for some strong reason. She might fear me because I wasn't weak, like Harley; or moonstruck like her husband; or fawning like the family. She might fear me because I could see through the body she was wearing.

I stopped just outside the bedroom door and listened. No sound. Carefully, avoiding the noise of scuffling, I put my shoes back on and then eased the snout of my gun around the doorframe, pointing at where I judged the bed to be. There was no movement from within.

I waited a few seconds and followed the gun with my eyes.

They had become used to the semi-darkness of the house, and I saw the room distinctly in the little light seeping in from the street. The bed was over by the windows and it had not been slept in. Startled, I looked around the room for Louise and saw no sign of her.

Without thinking, I stepped in the bedroom and flicked the wall switch.

There was a swift, frightened movement from the far side of the room and something ran across the floor, seeking the safety of darkness under the bed. I jumped for it, ran between it and the bed, and as it sought to dodge around me, stepped on it.

It never occurred to me to use the gun still in my hand. My first instinct had been to step on it, to smash out its life; and I had done so. I scraped the sole of my shoe clean on a rug and snapped off the bedroom light.

I went back to the kitchen. In the darkness I pulled a chair around facing the door and sat down with the gun in my hand, waiting for Jimmy to come home.

Their bed had not been slept in—neither of them used it.

—Wilson Tucker

Condemned "criminals" were allowed to choose their own destiny—it could be either past or future Time—but when they arrived There they had to do everything for themselves. It was—almost—like starting life afresh.

DOUBLE ACT

By **HOWARD LEE McCAREY,**

Illustrated by **ROWLAND**

Bud Dockett swayed his fat little body backwards and forwards, the glare of the spotlights picking out the violently clashing colours of his check suit. "Did I tell you about the new canning machine we've got down on the farm?"

"No," said Kroyd, twisting his famous hat back to front. "Do tell me about the new canning machine you've got down on the farm."

Dockett took a quick step to the footlights. "It's a smasher! Saves money too. You see, all the food we can't eat we can."

Kroyd's face was blank. "What you can't eat you can?"

"That's right. We eat what we can and what's left over we can."

"You mean can't."

"I mean can."

"Can what?"

"Can can."

Kroyd started an eccentric dance, kicking his long legs into the air. "Oh well, if you insist."

"You thin drip!" said Dockett, "Now what are you doing?"



"The can-can."

Dockett grimaced. "You're hopeless!"

They went straight into the old soft shoe shuffle, facing the hostile audience in the small theatre with artificial smiles. During

the well-known song with which they always finished their act Dockett whispered, "It's no good, Tiny, we've had it."

They walked off to boos and catcalls and into the arms of the uniformed men who waited in the wings.

The people packed into the tiered rows of seats extending entirely round the circular hall were in merry mood. Shouts of laughter came from the lower priced sections high up in the gallery where the sellers of the new balloon ices and the packets of confectionery were doing the bulk of their trade.

In the centre of the vast floor, two men sat cross-legged on a raised platform. About them—making a cage without a door—beams of light spaced vertically at four-inch intervals marked the presence of the invisible electronic stun bars.

From the multi-speakers suspended from the roof a voice said, stilling the laughter and the talk, "Before you, you see Edward Fiddleton Kroyd and Bertram Dockett. Found Guilty. They have chosen future." The buzz broke out anew.

"Kroyd and Dockett? They're the comics aren't they?"

"They were."

"What did they do then?"

"The usual, fell below standard—F.B.S., they call it. Their script-writers were sent last week: good job too if you ask me."

From the mighty organ came the start of the send-off music; discordant variations on an eerie theme which was presently faded down for another announcement:

"Don't miss Monday's great show! Presently scheduled for send-off are Basil Tonquet, ex-Member of Parliament for East Whimsey, crime F.B.S. Thomas Martin Quench, ex-Member of Parliament for Hoddlesnatch, crime F.B.S. Henry Nocrust, baker, crime F.B.S. Alfred Penman, forger, crime F.B.S."

The music returned.

Down in the cage of light, Dockett shrugged thickset shoulders. "I just don't understand it, Tiny! Why, they laughed their boots off in Wigan and in Bootle we had 'em rolling in the aisles."

Kroyd drew up his long thin legs under his chin. "We've been over all that, Bud. Let's face it, it was a while ago."

The beams of light round the cage changed from white to a steely blue and a deep murmur, quickly hushed, swept through the hall. The blue became a pulsing green.

Kroyd looked a querry at Dockett. "I'm told it goes red," said the fat man.

The green became edged with orange.

"It's a funny thing," said Kroyd, "but I'm damned if I can think of a single gag."

Dockett grinned. "According to the judge you never could."

The beams were brilliant orange and the hall was still.

"At least," said Kroyd, "we have the stage to ourselves."

"And we're playing to a full house."

The orange trembled into red.

Dockett held out a pudgy hand. "It's still a double act, Tiny."

Into the silence following the spectacular flash that left the cage empty, a shrill voice cried, "where've they gone, Mum? where've they gone?" But Mum didn't answer because Mum didn't know. Neither did Kroyd and Dockett.

The crowd roared.

Two men—ant-size against the immensity of the plain—walked slowly beneath the torrid sun. In all directions the landscape was utterly featureless; a level plain of mud stretching without break to the haze of the horizon.

Mopping his brow, Dockett said for the ninth time, "It would be nice to know when we are."

"Right now it wouldn't help much," said Kroyd. "I'd rather know where we are, and where we're heading."

"Maybe nowhere," grumbled Dockett. "And for Pete's sake go slower or I'll never even make that. Those stilts you call legs are twice as long as mine."

Kroyd's pace slackened. "It's just that I'm fed up with the sight of all this mud."

"Could be there's nothing else. When those operators spin the wheel they couldn't care less when-to they send us."

The glare of the high sun, bright in a burnished sky, beat down upon their shoulders, sucking the very moisture from their bones.

Almost imperceptibly, seeming to bear no relation to their progress, their shadows, from being small circles just in front of them, moved to become small circles immediately behind them. At length Kroyd stopped, pointing ahead. "There's some sort of mirage over there; small black dots in the sky."

"More likely in front of your eyes."

"No, they're there alright."

"Well, I haven't the strength to jump and take a peek," Dockett said wearily. "Let's get on a bit."

Kroyd kept his gaze on the black objects about a mile in front of them. "They're definitely in the air," he reported at last. "But they're not so high up as I thought they were."

Then Dockett cried out, "I've got 'em! straight ahead: like birds hovering over something—or monstrous flies."

They walked in silence for a while, then Kroyd said, "I think I've got sunstroke."

"No you haven't," said Dockett quietly. "I can see them too."

They stopped and stared at each other; Kroyd at Bud Dockett's dusty, sweat-stained face; the little fat man up into the tall man's questioning eyes. "People don't walk about in the air with nothing to support them," Kroyd said at length. "And anyway, what would they be doing in this ruddy desert?"

"Maybe it's all done with wires," suggested Dockett, brightening, "like that act of Jerry's—you know, The Great Aeros."

Kroyd shook his head doubtfully. "We'll know when we get there."

When they reached wherever "there" was, there was no longer room for doubt, except of their senses. All about them, as though they were in the centre of a ghost town, people were coming and going along invisible aerial ways. High up in the air on their right, a man and a woman reclined in a sitting position facing each other. Below them, as though on another floor, four or five people appeared to be seated round a table although, if indeed they were in a room, neither table, chairs, walls, floor nor ceiling were visible. At other levels, and on all sides, people were standing, walking, sitting; going through the motions of eating, working, carrying things; normal daily occupations. But only the people were visible.

To their left, an outburst of cheering attracted their attention, and Kroyd and Dockett saw a host of people, all in a sitting position and in curved rows facing the same direction.

Dockett said, "It seems crazy, Tiny! There must be a town here but we can't see it. Only the people."

Kroyd still gaped around him in open-mouthed fascination. Dockett nudged him. "There's another funny thing. No one is wearing clothes."

Kroyd's long face split into a grin. "So I noticed."

"Oh well, it's hot enough."

"I suppose it hasn't occurred to you," said Kroyd, his gaze roving, "that the clothes, like all the rest, may be invisible."

"That doesn't make sense. Why should we see some things and not others?"

Kroyd shrugged. "Search me!"

Dockett gasped as a thought struck him. "I suppose you can still see my clothes, Tiny? I can see yours."

Kroyd laughed, bending his thin body almost double. He went on laughing until Dockett said again, earnestly, "Can you, Tiny?"

"Sure, Bud, sure! It's just that I don't seem to have laughed for an age." He wiped tears from his eyes. "We've certainly struck an odd time."

"It's not so funny," said Dockett. "I've got a thirst like a camel and I could eat a horse!" He paused, gazing at the people who moved in the air, and who seemed unaware of their existence. "I doubt this place is here at all. I can't help thinking that we're still plodding across this mud desert, out on our feet."

"We'll soon find out," said Kroyd, "here comes one of the local citizens."

Coming towards them was a medium sized man treading delicately on air some six inches above the mud. His skin was pink and healthy looking and he had the suggestion of a paunch.

"Good day to you, sir," said Kroyd with a sidelong glance at Dockett.

The man stopped. "Go away! I don't wish to see you." Checking afterwards, both of them agreed that it was as soon as he spoke to them that the man became clothed. He wore garments of a pale mauve in the approximate design of a battledress blouse but with the trousers more of a baggy, Eastern cut. He seemed surprised to find them still there.

He bowed. "Gentlemen, I owe you an apology. I thought you figments but you can hardly blame me: such extremely odd clothes! Whatever induced you to make those?"

Dockett held out a chubby hand. "We're new here, old man, you must excuse us. My name's Dockett, Bud to my friends, and my pal here is Tiny Kroyd."

The elegant citizen bowed. "Hobble," he said, "Claud Hobble, at your service."

Kroyd took off his famous hat and returned the bow.

Hobble said, "Did I understand you to say you were new here?"

Dockett nodded eagerly. "If we're really here then we're certainly new."

Hobble cocked his curled head to one side. "My dear fellow of course you're here; where else could you be? And as for being new, well, I wouldn't say you were exactly that."

"I assure you we are, Mr. Hobble," said Kroyd anxiously, leaning like a wind-blown lamp-post.

Claud Hobbles leaned casually against a wall that was not only invisible but, as Kroyd found when he put out a tentative hand, immaterial. "The evident facts, my dear fellows, give the lie to your statements, although, I must say, the reason for such obvious falsehoods eludes me."

"Come again?" said Dockett, a frown on his fat face.

"He means he doesn't believe us," explained Kroyd.

Hobbles laughed. "Naturally, my dear fellows: if you're new where are your wheel chairs?"

Kroyd and Dockett exchanged glances. Kroyd said, "Mr. Hobbles, whether you believe us or not we are new here. We should be grateful if you would tell us a thing or two."

"Such as where we are and when we are," added Dockett. "And what all these people are doing wandering about in the air?"

Hobbles regarded them from narrowed eyes. "You are not playing truant from Reception?"

Dockett and Kroyd's heads shook in unison and Hobbles said, half to himself, "No, that's not it, too young," and then to Kroyd who he seemed to regard as the more intelligent. "As to where you are, you are Here, and as to when, well, when else can you be but now?"

"The bloke's barmy," whispered Dockett.

Hobbles pushed himself off from the wall that wasn't. "If you can dispute that, my friend, you are the one who is disarranged." He turned to go. "I don't know who dressed you two up but I wish they'd unthink you."

Kroyd put out his hand, finding considerable satisfaction in the discovery that Hobbles was sufficiently real to be touched. "Please don't go, Mr. Hobbles. We really are in a jam. You must explain."

Hobbles glanced at an invisible something on his wrist. "Sky!" he muttered, "it's later than I thought. Excuse me while I change."

As they watched his baggy trousers turned from mauve to a deep pink and his upper garment to a blue-dotted apricot colour. A hat of curious design appeared on his head. "You were saying?" he asked.

Kroyd gaped, scratching the back of his neck perplexedly. Dockett's thick fingers flew to close his open mouth. "Rather effective, what?" said Hobbles, watching them with a smile.

"Sure, sure thing!" stuttered Kroyd, glancing down at his own clothes to find them unchanged.

Dockett swallowed hard. "Don't do things like that!"

"Like what? I don't understand you."



"You don't understand!" exploded Dockett.

Kroyd said, taking a firm hold on his senses, "Nobody dreamed us up, Mr. Hobble. We are. I mean we are ourselves."

"We're not of this time, Hobble old man," added Dockett desperately. "Be a pal and put us in the picture."

Claud Hobble considered, chewing the knob of a cane which had appeared in his hand. "Time travellers, what?" he said at length. "Am I right?"

"You've got it in one, old man," said Dockett.

"Brother Dockett . . ." began Hobble severely . . .

"Bud . . ."

"Bud then. If I may give you a word of advice, don't call people old man, it's not only unfashionable but a breach of good manners."

Dockett grinned. "No offence, old man, I mean Claud."

Hobble inclined his head. "Just what did you expect to achieve by your time-leap?"

Kroyd said bitterly, "Achieve nothing! We didn't want to be sent."

"It was a case of professional jealousy," explained Dockett, "and there was no appeal. Only the choice of past or future."

"So naturally we chose future," finished Kroyd.

"How is it that you don't even know where you are?" Hobble wanted to know.

Kroyd shuffled his big feet in the mud. "It's not done. They just spin the wheel; why should they care?"

"That certainly explained your confusion. Well, not that it will help you much, you're in Year 14,111, Era 7, Phase 4."

"And the name of this dump—I mean place?" asked Dockett.

"I told you, it's Here."

"I'll buy it," said Kroyd. "Where's Here?"

Dockett started to laugh, wishing at the same time he had something to lean against. He put a hand up to Kroyd's shoulder and shook helplessly. Hobble watched with obvious distaste. "Just like one of our routines," spluttered Dockett at length. "Where's Here? On the road to There, I suppose?"

"You're perfectly right," said Hobble, regarding him with more respect. "Here's where we are now, There's where we shall be. Some people find difficulty in grasping it."

Dockett winked at Kroyd. "Can't think why!"

Kroyd's gaze wandered to the people who still came and went, stepping lightly in the air, or who sat about at different levels variously engaged. He singled out a man reclining on his back at a higher level than most. There was something familiar about the movements he was making and for a moment Kroyd watched. Then he had it; the man was going through the motions of taking a bath. He pointed upwards, "Now that we know where we are

and when, perhaps you would explain further. For instance, what's that chap up there doing?"

Claud Hobble looked up sharply. "I don't see anyone!"

"Come off it, old man," said Dockett. "That geezer up there lying down washing himself with invisible soap in an invisible bath . . . just above that couple . . ."

Claud Hobble banged his cane on the ground. "Of course! I'd quite forgotten that you cannot see the projections! How extremely embarrassing! You must come with me at once to Reception."

Claud Hobble stopped once before they reached the place. "Sky take it!" he exclaimed. "We could have come by car if you hadn't upset me so by not seeing things. However, we're nearly there."

Kroyd noticed that there did not seem to be any definite roads and assumed that they, too, were projections invisible to them. Passing an area in which the air close by was particularly crowded, he nudged Dockett. Together they watched as several people, strolling about 100 feet up, gathered in a small group and descended vertically to the ground. "For all the world as though they were coming down by lift," muttered Dockett, amazed.

"They probably are," said Kroyd.

As though from nowhere a building appeared before them. "Reception," said Claud Hobble. "The only general projection."

"D'you mean it's not really here?" asked Kroyd.

Hobble looked at him strangely. "It's here when you're Here," he said, and led them down a paved pathway between banks of flowers whose scents filled the air. After the desert of mud, the soft green of the lawns was as good as food and drink. Kroyd found it oddly disturbing that the scents were familiar.

They followed Claud Hobble through a high doorway into a spacious pillared hall. "I'll leave you now," he said. "Perhaps we shall meet again." He was gone before they could thank him.

They stood gazing about them. Through many doors which opened at their approach, white coated attendants came and departed purposefully. The centre of the hall, they saw, was almost entirely filled by row upon row of empty wheel chairs. Kroyd said, "Friend Hobble talked of wheel chairs, remember, Bud?"

Dockett started to nod, then stood rigid. Besides him, Kroyd felt the hairs at the nape of his neck stiffen. In the chair at one end of the front row an old man appeared. Within seconds the next chair was filled and then another and another until half the

row was filled. Some were men, some were women, all were old. At once attendants came forward, each taking a chair, and wheeled the occupants from the hall. Dockett swore under his breath, his fat face pale.

"You seem shocked," said a quiet voice behind them and they swung round to find a girl regarding them enquiringly.³ Kroyd saw that she was young and slim and attractive.

Dockett recovered quickly. "If you're a projection," he smiled, "somebody's got smashing taste."

The girl glanced at him sharply, puzzlement in her grey eyes. Without replying, she beckoned to one of the attendants. "There's something wrong," they heard her say. "One of these men is talking about projection."

The man looked them up and down with a professional air but his manner was friendly enough. "Suppose you tell us all about it," he suggested.

"It's not quite unique," he said when they had finished. "It happened once before although the circumstances were rather different: a voluntary not an enforced remove." He turned to the girl. "Carry on. Normal procedure."

Dockett stared suspiciously at the man's retreating back. "What might normal procedure be, ducks?"

She smiled at them. "It starts with the chairs, those are the normal arrival points."

"Arrival!" exclaimed Dockett. "Looks more like departure to me."

"It's really both," said the girl. "Nothing whatever to worry about."

Kroyd said, "If we could have a wash and a meal I'd feel a lot better." He felt hot and dusty and hollow with hunger.

"Of course," said the girl, "just take a seat."

As they moved towards the rows of chairs they saw that many more were filled. "Not those!" called the girl. "We don't want any accidents!" Two attendants came forward at her call, pushing empty chairs.

"I see what you mean," grinned Dockett, as he seated himself. "I don't fancy having some old geezer plonked on me."

Kroyd could not rid himself of the feeling that they were in some sort of institution. He looked anxiously at the girl. "What's going to happen to us?"

She looked into his eyes and he felt himself relaxing. A sense of tremendous well-being flowed through him. "All that you wish," she said.

Their chairs moved forward but consciousness lasted only until the doors opened towards them.

It was slow work at first, even though whatever process they had been through had resulted in a sharpening of each mental image so that it stood out in almost unbelievable detail. So clear in the mind's eye that it seemed real. Physically, each agreed they had never felt better.

They had been allotted a single storey frame building. The three main rooms, well and completely furnished, were crammed with bric-a-brac; vases, ornaments, books, statuettes and model machines of strange design. Food and drink appeared mysteriously and at regular intervals on the sitting room table. They were free to come and go in the gardens, to walk to the heathland which surrounded the place, or to laze on the banks of the stream which flowed close by their house. They saw no one. Not until later did they realise that memory of all that they had seen outside had been withdrawn during their time at Reception.

It was Kroyd who first made the discovery. He had got into the habit of making written notes of the thoughts which occurred to him and of objects and incidents which aroused his interest. He used his own pen, and the ink and paper of which there seemed to be an endless supply in one of the cupboards.

There came a morning when he could find neither. Feeling thwarted, he went to the table and sat there, nibbling the end of his pen. For some reason this absence of paper irked him: he became consumed with a desire for paper, reams of it; smooth and white; its blankness calling for words. In his mind's eye he could see it, so clearly that he could almost take the top sheet from the neat pile.

Suddenly, there in front of him on the table, were sheets of paper, neatly stacked. He reached out; touched them; lifted the top sheet.

His shout of amazement brought Bud Dockett running in from his rocking chair on the verandah. "What's up, Tiny?"

Kroyd's mouth worked but no sound came. He gestured to the pile of paper on the table. "Look at that!" he said at length. "I did it!"

Dockett stared at the table, then back at Kroyd. "Are you alright, old man?"

Kroyd looked at him, feeling irritated that the fat man did not at once appreciate the astonishing, the miraculous thing he had

done. "Of course I'm alright!" he snapped. "I just wanted you to see this paper—you can see it can't you?"

Dockett nodded. "Sure."

"I made it. At least, I made it appear, and it's real enough."

Dockett stared at him anxiously. "You look a bit pale, old man, let's take a walk." And when Kroyd did not answer, "Look, old man, you know as well as I do that there's always bags of paper in that cupboard. Like the other things, it never runs out."

Kroyd said slowly, controlling a rising excitement. "I tell you, Bud, the cupboard was empty so I made some more and there it is!"

Dockett frowned. "It probably just appeared on the table instead of in the cupboard. That's all there is to it."

Kroyd put his hand on Dockett's arm. "Bud, you must believe me. I know I made it."

"Okay," said Dockett at length, "so you made it. Now make some more and maybe you'll convince me."

Kroyd grinned from pure joy. "Just watch!" He leaned back in his chair and tried to think of paper; a bigger pile this time. But the excitement that quivered within him and a lingering irritation at Dockett's disbelief kept jarring the mental picture into fragments before he could complete it. He closed his eyes and concentrated, smoothing all other thoughts from his mind. There it was, on the table a little to the right of the first pile. He sketched in the corners, standing out sharply white against the polished darkness of the table top. And there would be shadow on the side away from the window. He became absorbed in the picture.

A gasp from Dockett made him open his eyes. On the table was a second and larger pile of paper. Kroyd relaxed, smiling. "Well, Bud?"

Dockett breathed deeply, letting out his breath in a long whistle. "I don't really believe it, Tiny, all the same."

"You mean you don't think I'm doing it?"

Dockett nodded and amazed Kroyd by adding, "Maybe you're linking with something or someone who knows what you want."

Kroyd remembered the dark-haired girl Jane. "All that you wish," she had said. "I don't think you're right, Bud. I had to get every detail absolutely clear before it worked. It wasn't merely the thought of the thing."

Dockett sighed, ideas beginning to stir. "I'll have a go myself," he said, and sat down at the table.

Proficiency came slowly. Kroyd's bottle of ink was glass alright and there was ink in it but he couldn't get the cap off until Dockett concentrated on the screw thread, which was his only success of the day. Before he tired, Kroyd produced still more paper; it seemed simpler to create a mental image once the pattern had been achieved. "You've got enough there to write a book," said Dockett, not without jealousy.

"I'm going to do just that," said Kroyd. "I like writing."

On the following day when they went into breakfast they discovered there were no tools and Dockett, to his great delight, achieved some serviceable knives, forks and spoons. "Good thing they weren't chopsticks," chuckled Kroyd, and they both laughed hysterically when two pairs of slender ivory sticks fell out of the air . . . "I saw them so clearly," Kroyd apologised, "but it means we have to watch our steps."

About a week later they noticed that things had begun to disappear from the house; not the objects they had created but some of the furniture and fittings and all the bric-a-brac. Only the models of the strange machines remained, or reappeared on the new furniture.

Dockett was considerably more successful in replacing cupboards, tables, bookcases and chairs but it was mainly Kroyd who filled them. His pictures, vases and bowls soon approximated works of art.

Time became meaningless as their powers increased and the house became filled with objects of their own thinking. Bud Dockett's earliest masterpiece was a typewriter which he presented to Kroyd—"Can't stand the scratching of that damn pen, Tiny!" Later he handed over a wire recorder—"Anthing to stop that endless clackety-clack!"

They met their first real snag on the day the supply of food ceased. Beads of sweat stood out on Dockett's forehead as he strove to conjure up a rare steak complete with trimmings, while Kroyd also failed utterly in his efforts to produce ham, eggs and salad. Eventually they fed miserably and inadequately on biscuits and water. More time passed before either of them could achieve a passable meal but after that they fed royally.

It was not until they awoke one morning to find their clothes gone and, roaring with laughter, had created some unorthodox garments of their own, that they discovered that, in some ways, their worlds were individual ones. Kroyd, mocking Dockett's efforts to turn out a pair of trousers, found that he could not himself alter them while Dockett still wore them. On the other hand,

he could make some and Dockett could put them on, and vice versa.

The problem of how to get rid of all the stuff they produced by way of practice and experiment became acute for they were soon finding it difficult to move about. It was clearly far more complicated to unthink something than to think it. After this came the problem of sharing their creations for they found they could not always see what the other had made. This particular complication came to light with Dockett's first woman.

For some days he had been sitting in his chair on the verandah rocking quietly backwards and forwards with a secretive smile on his face. Then, one evening as Kroyd was in the sitting room busy reeling off another chapter into the recorder, the door opened and Dockett came in. "Hey, Tiny!" he shouted excitedly, "meet Linda. Isn't she a honey?"

Kroyd looked up, startled. "What did you say?"

Dockett said again, "Meet Linda. Linda, meet Tiny."

Kroyd said nothing, merely gaped.

Dockett snapped, "You might at least say 'hello' instead of staring like a stuffed fish. I suppose you're just jealous."

Kroyd said quietly, "I can't see anybody, Bud."

Dockett turned abruptly from smiling into Linda's eyes. His right arm moved down to a waist invisible to Kroyd. "But Tiny! She's an absolute smasher! Half the fun's gone if you can't see her!"

Kroyd shook his head. "It must be strictly personal, Bud. What's she like?"

Dockett looked at his woman, not that he had any need to, she was clear enough in his mind. "She's got the cutest little face, blue eyes and a complexion that would send a film star green with envy. Her hair's golden—corny, I know but I like it—her nose is just right; her eyebrows have that certain curve that gets me; her lips! Brother, can she kiss! She's firm and cuddlesome and goes in and out at all the right places. Her legs are literally dream shapes! There's something a bit wrong with her dress but that doesn't seem to worry her and I couldn't care less."

As Dockett spoke, Kroyd began to see her, but vaguely, in bits and pieces as she was described. She never seemed whole or convincing, as far as he was concerned, she never smiled or spoke. If she gazed tenderly at Bud, only he saw it, and if she whispered sweet nothings only he heard them.

Kroyd found the incident upsetting: his train of thought was broken and all his ideas—except one—gone with the wind. He found it very much more difficult than he had thought it would be but eventually he was successful. After that, it wasn't so complicated. They were all slim and petite and dark haired, and, naturally, all his type. For a while Kroyd and Dockett saw little of each other.

Kroyd tired first and returned to his recording, filing reel after reel in the special cupboard he had thought. In between times he sat in the garden or went for walks on the heath. Aware that his abilities were constantly increasing, he took to making gardens of his own, stocking them with flowers of astonishing shapes and colours. He began to wonder why they had never seen anyone.

He was working one morning when he heard outside a metallic clang. A moment later Bud Dockett knocked on the door and walked in. "Hello, Tiny! All alone?"

Kroyd nodded, smiling a welcome. "Sure. Nice to see you."

Dockett grinned back. "Thought you might be. Care to come for a ride?"

"A ride?"

"That's right; got a ground car outside. A real beaut."

Kroyd jumped up, following Dockett through the door. There on the grass was a pear-shaped four-wheeled car, gleaming white in the sunshine. "I've been working on her for some time," said Dockett proudly. "Hop in."

The car moved off noiselessly. Dockett said casually, "We'll go over the bridge and then make our own way. Dockett's bridge, I call it. You've never seen anything like it."

Kroyd agreed when he saw it. It was a thing of beauty; fine and delicate of line, arching gracefully across the water with no visible support. After that he linked his thoughts with Dockett's and enjoyed the view.

On the return run, Dockett spoke of Linda and the others. "They were alright but they didn't have any will of their own. Funny thing, often thought I'd rather like that, but they weren't real; weren't people in their own right. It was a big mistake."

Kroyd agreed, "But not an unnatural one, and one that we had to make sooner or later I suppose." He sighed. "A pity. They were, after all, only figments: like that fellow Hobbie thought we were, remember?"

They stared at each other, realising that memory of an outside had been given back to them.

"Reception," muttered Kroyd.

"And that dark-haired girl and those chairs," echoed Dockett.

When they reached the other side of Dockett's bridge they drove into a small town but, oddly enough, this time they couldn't see the people, and they couldn't find their own house. After some searching they located the site. Piled there were the things they had created. "Somehow," said Kroyd, "there doesn't seem any point in building another place here. They probably want the space anyway."

"I'm with you," said Dockett. "We'll go into town. Remember the people in the air?"

"I'll just take my reels," murmured Kroyd, "and unthink the rest. We can do better now."

They tidied the space and drove to the gates. Beyond them was a city of elegant buildings, wide roads and green parks. "I suppose we can share or build something for ourselves," wondered Dockett aloud. "What do you think, Tiny?"

Kroyd shrugged. "We'll find out. If we want to build I suppose we find somebody who's an expert, although there's nothing, as far as I can see, to prevent us doing it ourselves." He yawned and stretched. "Let's see whether there are any hotels first; I'm a lazy type."

They turned into another of the wide roads. "I wonder which is real," said Dockett. "All that mud or this city. It's a beautiful place?"

Kroyd said thoughtfully, "I guess you can always find mud if you look for it."

They found a hotel and booked rooms without difficulty. They made friends. They seemed to be getting younger.

Much of the citizens' time, they discovered, was spent in playing games, and Kroyd and Dockett took up golf, linking thoughts with themselves or with their opponents to lay out a course or playing on one of the general projection ones. Their shots, like those of their opponents, were miracles of precision. The delight of seeing the white ball curve a perfect path against the blue of the sky, or follow a true line on the greens, never lessened. In the same way, balls pitched deliberately into bunkers made possible recovery shots of extreme and satisfying delicacy. Sometimes they won, sometimes they lost, but always they enjoyed themselves.

And while Kroyd added steadily to his store of reels, Bud Dockett, remembering the models of strange machines in the house at Reception, recreated them and tinkered for hours until he had discovered their purpose.

As in Reception, time seemed to have no meaning even though day and night alternated normally enough. There were other aspects of life in Here, however, that were far from normal. For one thing, Bud Dockett's beard. His black growth had been the bane of his life; five o'clock shadow coming upon him soon after midday. Now, he found that he was going for a full week without shaving. He mentioned it to Kroyd and found that Kroyd had stopped shaving altogether.

One morning, in the bar which, like the hotel itself, was a communal mental projection, a small boy came up to them. "My dear fellows," he said in a piping treble. "Delighted to see you! How are you?"

They stared blankly at him. The boy made a slight bow. "Hobble," he said. "Claud Hobble, at your service."

"Ye gods!" said Dockett aghast. "If you're the bloke we met you haven't half shrunk!"

Hobble, although now apparently no more than 7 or 8 years old, had all his earlier composure. "I'm he alright—you're the time-travelling chaps." It was more statement than question.

"There's a distinct likeness," admitted Kroyd, scratching his head in bewilderment. "But what's happened to you?"

Hobble smiled. "It comes to all of us, my dear fellow. It comes to all of us."

"The devil it does!" ejaculated Dockett. "We'd better all have a drink quickly. What's yours, Claud?"

Young Hobble ordered a lemonade. "And make it fizzy," he added. "I appear to like it better that way." He seemed surprised that it should be so. Over his drink he looked at Kroyd and Dockett. "Mean to say you haven't found out yet?"

"Found out what?" asked Kroyd.

"That you get younger Here; younger and younger and smaller and smaller—although there's a limit, naturally."

"Then what happens?" Dockett wanted to know.

Hobble watched the bubbles bursting in his glass. He laughed suddenly and executed a little dance. "Don't mind me, it's just my age showing." He stopped and climbed onto a stool. "Seriously though, it's nothing to worry about. As I say, and as you can see, one just gets younger. Any day now the urge will come—you'll get it too—and I shall be off back to Reception."

Kroyd said, "But only old people go there."

"Rot!" said young Hobble. "You only saw a part of it. What you don't seem to know is that Reception is also Departure."

"Where for?" asked Dockett.

"Almost any time you like, so long as it's in the past. They advise you not to take some years, of course."

"Do you mean," queried Kroyd, "that you go back to Reception and finish up as a baby back in the past?"

"Right!" said Hobbles and emptied his glass at a gulp.

"Not likely!" said Dockett. "I like it here."

"That's what we all say, at first. But when the urge comes you can't resist it." Claud Hobbles jumped down from his stool. "I've chosen my year—1960. I wanted it to be a bit earlier but they said they wouldn't advise any earlier years in the 20th century." He waved goodbye and pranced out of the bar, swinging a balloon that had appeared in his hand.

Some time a month or so later, as they sat in their hotel together, Kroyd said, "Hobbles told us it would come. A strange feeling of dissatisfaction, when there is an emptiness in any and every achievement."

Dockett looked at him, thinking how astonishingly they had changed from the dimly recalled Kroyd and Dockett of old. "I know what you mean, Tiny." He giggled, "Tiny suits you now," and added, "have you got it?"

Kroyd nodded. "Had it for some time. It brings a curiously powerful urge to take on something . . ." he paused. "Something quite unknown and indescribably difficult." He paused again. "Odd that when we go we shall forget all this."

"They said we might remember some things," murmured Dockett. "Things that we've learned to do."

Kroyd glanced round the room and out of the window at the city. "I'm going back to Reception in the morning."

Dockett sighed. "I'll come with you, Tiny."

In the cold light of a winter morning, two small figures—one tall for his age the other dumpy—loitered their way to school. Kroyd said, boylike à propos of nothing. "You know what I'm going to be when I grow up, Bud? A famous author."

Young Dockett, taking a flying kick at a pile of snow, said, "Pooh! I'm going to be a n'engineer; a famous engineer!"

A bell began to ring in the distance and Kroyd and Dockett broke into a run.

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